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PUBLIC RELEASE THE AIR FORCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Shield for Vietnamization

and Withdrawal

1971

by

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## FOREWORD

This monograph is the fifteenth in a series of historical studies covering USAF plans, policies, and operations in Southeast Asia, published under the general title, The Air Force in Southeast Asia. Its focus is the role of the Air Force in support of American Decisions to withdraw U. S. combat troops and to turn the conduct of the war over to the South Vietnamese. Massive USAF efforts were devoted to attacking and destroying enemy stockpiles and troop concentrations in Cambodia and Laos, to supporting South Vietnamese ground attacks in the Laotian panhandle, to attempting to Vietnamize the interdiction function, and, finally, to countering the enemy air buildup in late 1971. Complicating these endeavors was the requirement to withdraw certain American air units as part of the overall drawdown from Southeast Asia.

In describing these actions, the author reviews key national policies and other developments that affected operations. These provide a background for understanding the dramatic events of 1971 in which the USAF was so much involved. It is an exciting and significant aspect of Air Force history.

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## PREFACE

(U) The story of U. S. air power in Southeast Asia in 1971 is the story of the Administration's continuing, and at times intensified, use of it to thwart enemy initiatives everywhere in Indochina and insure the success of U. S. Vietnamization and withdrawal programs. On withdrawal, above all, President Richard M. Nixon's course remained as firm throughout 1971 as in February when he told Congress: "They will not deflect us from our overall course of phased withdrawal from Indochina."\*

(U) With ever fewer U. S. ground troops and increasing signs of enemy aggressiveness, there was, naturally, concern within the Administration that its carefully laid withdrawal plans might be upset by some new enemy offensive. This was why the President did not cease warning North Vietnam that if its actions jeopardized remaining U. S. forces, the United States would respond, particularly with air power. This was why he directed new operations in 1971 interdicting enemy forces and supplies in Cambodia and Laos and North Vietnam--to prevent them from building up for new offensives in the south. This was why he warned Congress that North Vietnamese actions could require still higher levels of American air operations in order to further Vietnamization and U. S. withdrawals.† This was why he repeatedly stressed looking ahead to withdrawal schedules for 1972, when there would be even fewer troops and greater vulnerability. He noted that: "The more disruption of the trails that occurs . . . now . . . the greater the possibility that the United States may be able to increase the rate of its withdrawal."

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\* Mr. Nixon's 1971 statements regarding U. S. policies in Southeast Asia are in Public Papers of the President, Richard M. Nixon, 1971 (Washington: Govt Print Ofc, 1973, pp 158, 257, 266, 287-8, 390, 395, 449, 541-2, 1104.

† The President alluded to this requirement three times in the course of his second annual report to the Congress on U. S. foreign policy, on 25 Feb 71.

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(U) In keeping with the strong U.S. commitment to withdrawal, however, the Administration also ordered cutbacks and reductions in air strength, especially in the second half of 1971. But these had to proceed cautiously, for although Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird pressed for the reductions to quiet domestic critics of the war, the field commanders always argued strongly against cutting back their only remaining weapon.

(U) Vietnamization, the other side of the U.S. withdrawal came in for greatly increased attention in 1971. The Administration, for example, made an intense effort to find ways for the South Vietnamese to take over more of the interdiction role in stopping enemy infiltration. Because the South Vietnamese could not duplicate the sophisticated U.S. air interdiction capabilities, attention focussed on their using ground force interdiction or a combination of air and ground elements. Both the size and the responsibilities of the South Vietnamese Air Force increased substantially, and during 1971 it made very remarkable progress. But pilot training requirements and their aircraft inventory remained major limitations, especially in the face of Hanoi's stepped up MIG activity during the latter part of the year.

(U) As for the President's parallel policy of negotiations, prospects in 1971 remained bleak. The President repeatedly pushed his October 1970 cease-fire proposal, but Hanoi did not respond. As he had noted on an earlier occasion, negotiations were not entirely in U.S. hands. And indeed, as 1971 ended, the enemy had greatly accelerated his military preparations and operations--especially in air defense. As a result, the United States in late 1971 found itself carrying on the biggest air strikes against North Vietnam since the November 1968 bombing halt.

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## I. USAF OPERATIONS IN SUPPORT OF NATIONAL POLICY

(U) Air operations played a central role in the two major U. S. military actions during 1971: the defense of Cambodia against strong enemy attacks during the first part of the year, and the support of Lam Son 719, South Vietnam's cross-border operation into Laos to interdict enemy buildups preparing there for a new offensive. Since U. S. ground forces were leaving South Vietnam so rapidly, there was really no alternative for the Administration but to use air to support both operations. Further, if one thing was clear, it was President Nixon's apparent confidence in, and determination to use, the air weapon in trying to withdraw while holding off North Vietnamese attack.

### Presidential Policies on Use of Air

(U) In a 4 January 1971 television interview with four prominent news reporters, the President laid out his position on the use of air power in SEA in unmistakable terms. He first cited the November 1968 understanding\* permitting unarmed reconnaissance planes over North Vietnam and reconfirmed his own orders to U. S. airmen to fire on SAM sites or whatever else attacked their planes. He then spoke at length of "the other understanding. . . one that I have laid down . . . a new one which

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\* During meetings in Paris with the Hanoi delegation, following President Lyndon B. Johnson's order on 31 October 1968 ending the bombings north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), the American negotiators explained the U. S. would end "all bombardments and all acts involving the use of force" but that U. S. air reconnaissance would continue. The U. S. delegates repeatedly used the above phrase with the North Vietnamese, arguing that "reconnaissance is not an act involving the use of force." The North Vietnamese suggested other words but finally accepted the phrase and used it in their statement to the press issued after the bombing halt. [See Department of State Bulletin, vol LIX, no 1536, 2 Dec 68, pp 563-4.]

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goes along with our Vietnamization program and our withdrawal program. " When asked if it didn't bother him that this new policy was not made clear before he ordered the heavy December 1970 bombing raids on supply lines in the passes from North Vietnam into Laos, the President replied:

I made it clear not just a month ago, but in November [1969]. . when I warned the North Vietnamese that if at a time we were withdrawing they stepped up their infiltration and threatened our remaining forces, that I would retaliate.

I have said that on eight different occasions on national television and radio. I have said it also in other messages to them that have gotten to them very loud and very clear. So there is no question about the understanding, and that was why we did this.<sup>1</sup>

(U) Nevertheless, in now referring to his policy as a "new, " "other" understanding which he had laid down, the President for the first time clearly distinguished it from President Johnson's, and implicitly acknowledged that his policy on bombing had indeed changed over the months and years of his administration. He was to reiterate his "new" position again and again in 1971, never hesitating to make his intentions unmistakably clear as when he said "I am not going to place any limitation upon the use of airpower except... use of tactical nuclear weapons. "2

(U) The President's repeated threats to use air power were not just idle saber rattling. As 1971 progressed, it became all too clear that enemy activity was pointing more and more to the very contingency the President was warning against. Thus, while he was making the firm statements about using air on 4 January, he was faced with rising enemy activity on three fronts.

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In Cambodia, North Vietnamese forces were in effect strangling supply lines into the capital of Phnom Penh and moving into new sanctuary areas; in Laos, the Pathet Lao were again seriously threatening Gen Vang Pao's forces; and along North Vietnamese passes into Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos, enemy stockpiling was reaching ominous proportions. The President was determined to head off the future offensive implicit in these enemy moves. He was also determined to continue withdrawing U.S. ground forces. Failure in either of these objectives, he knew, would be relentlessly exploited by the opposition in the upcoming 1972 presidential elections. The one way to cover all these threatening contingencies was to make maximum use of air, his remaining forceful weapon. Hence his long, careful and continuing efforts to lay the groundwork justifying such use.

(U) The President's main strategy in trying to assure success of his policies centered on stopping or slowing up, by whatever means, the buildup and the flow of men and materials to South Vietnam. In his report to Congress on 25 February, President Nixon (saying he might need increased air activities to accomplish it) stated this strategy very clearly:<sup>3</sup>

. . . we are trying to prevent the enemy from building up their capabilities for major offensives. Our aim is to destroy their supplies and disrupt their planning for assaults on allied forces in South Vietnam

If this was not done, he explained, Vietnamization gains made thus far could be lost before they had time to become effective. Worse, the pressures on South Vietnamese forces left increasingly alone to face the North, would become too severe, and they might suffer some major defeat. Past efforts to destroy enemy build ups--particularly the Cambodian invasion and the B-52 strikes there--had succeeded in keeping major offensives from developing on South Vietnamese territory and in buying time for the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) to improve. But now with increasing U.S. withdrawals, the enemy was becoming ever bolder in infiltration efforts towards and into the northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Above all, he was renewing infiltration efforts across the border into Cambodia and Laos, both of which he clearly aimed to use as springboards

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for assaults on SVN. Further, to help his plans along, the enemy was endeavoring to oust the pro-American governments struggling to survive in both places.

(U) Since enemy successes outside South Vietnam (in adjacent areas) bore directly on security inside it, the U.S. could not confine its actions just to its Saigon's territory. Hence the President did not wait until enemy forces and supplies crossed the border at a time of Hanoi's choosing--perhaps in some major push in 1972 when, with U.S. ground forces almost gone, South Vietnam would be highly vulnerable. As in the case of the 1970 Cambodian sanctuary incursion, he more and more directed his interdiction efforts in a pre-emptive manner outside South Vietnam, into Cambodia and Laos and later in the year into North Vietnam itself.

#### Cambodia

(●) The Administration turned to air power in early 1971 for help for Cambodian forces struggling against an enemy infiltrating new sanctuary areas and tightening its hold on major lines of communication (LOC) in the country. Besides controlling main roads, Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces were harassing Mekong River traffic and pressing attacks on villages close around the capital. On 22 January, an enemy sapper attack destroyed or damaged 69 aircraft on Phnom Penh airfield (52 Cambodian and 17 South Vietnamese). To counteract this increasing threat of enemy takeover, the Administration during January and February directed expanded U.S. air operations, bringing aerial activity in Cambodia to its highest level since the incursion of June 1970.<sup>4</sup>

(●) This step-up in U.S. air operations provoked an immediate outcry from the U.S. press and some members of Congress. The latter charged that the President was violating the Cooper-Church \* amendment (which banned U.S. ground troops in Cambodia), as well as his promise of the year before to get all U.S. forces out of Cambodia at the end of the incursion on

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\* Senators John Cooper of Tennessee and Frank Church of Idaho.

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30 June. The President at that time had said the United States would continue air interdiction activity after U.S. troops withdrew. But it was not widely known that he had at the same time authorized a much broader variety of U.S. air support which had continued and intensified throughout 1970.<sup>5</sup>

(U) Secretary Laird replied for the Administration in a 20 January news conference, making no bones about past or present use of air power:

We did...use air power in Cambodia, and we have continued to use it,\* although it was not directly related to the South Vietnamese sanctuary operation.

I don't want to get into a semantic problem here of what this mission is called, or that mission. I have always called it "air activities," "air support" as far as Cambodia is concerned; we will use air power, and as long as I am serving in this job, I will recommend that we use air power to supplement the South Vietnamese forces, as far as the air campaign in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia..to reduce American casualties..and see that the Vietnamization program..is assured.. We are going to supplement as far as air power is concerned.

I don't want anyone to leave this room with any other understanding. We have this authority. It was spelled out clearly in the Congressional amendments which limit ground combat activities, which I support...but as far as air and sea activities, the law is very clear that as far as the sanctuaries or as far as protecting the Vietnamization program...insuring withdrawal, all those terms are written very emphatically and clearly into the..legislation.

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\* Although Mr. Laird's statement conceded the past use of air power in Cambodia, its full import did not become apparent until 1 1/2 years later when the Department of Defense issued a detailed report on the "secret" bombing of that country, initiated on 19 March 1969 with the approval of the Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. For further details, see Appendix 2.



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When asked if his statements meant there were no inhibitions of any kind on the use of air power in Cambodia, Secretary Laird replied that he didn't care to discuss the operating orders, but added that "certain protections" were written into these orders. He said he doubted that the United States would get up to the level of last year, "but we could. I don't want to be in a position of putting a sortie limitation..."

(U) The following day, 64 members of the U.S. House of Representatives introduced legislation barring funds for U.S. sea and air combat support. This measure failed, however, and a few days later Secretary of State William P. Rogers took up the defense of U.S. air in Cambodia. He said this was not going to get the U.S. bogged down in a land war in Cambodia or Laos. "But," he said, "we are going to continue to use that air power because it protects American lives. It's the least costly way to protect our men--and why we should have any restrictions on the use of that air power to protect American lives, I don't know." He noted how the President had repeatedly said he would use air power as he saw fit against enemy forces, supplies and communications, and to prevent him from re-establishing sanctuary areas. And he added:

Now, we don't have to wait in that connection.  
We don't have to wait until the base areas have been re-established. We want to take the action which is necessary to prevent that from happening. 6

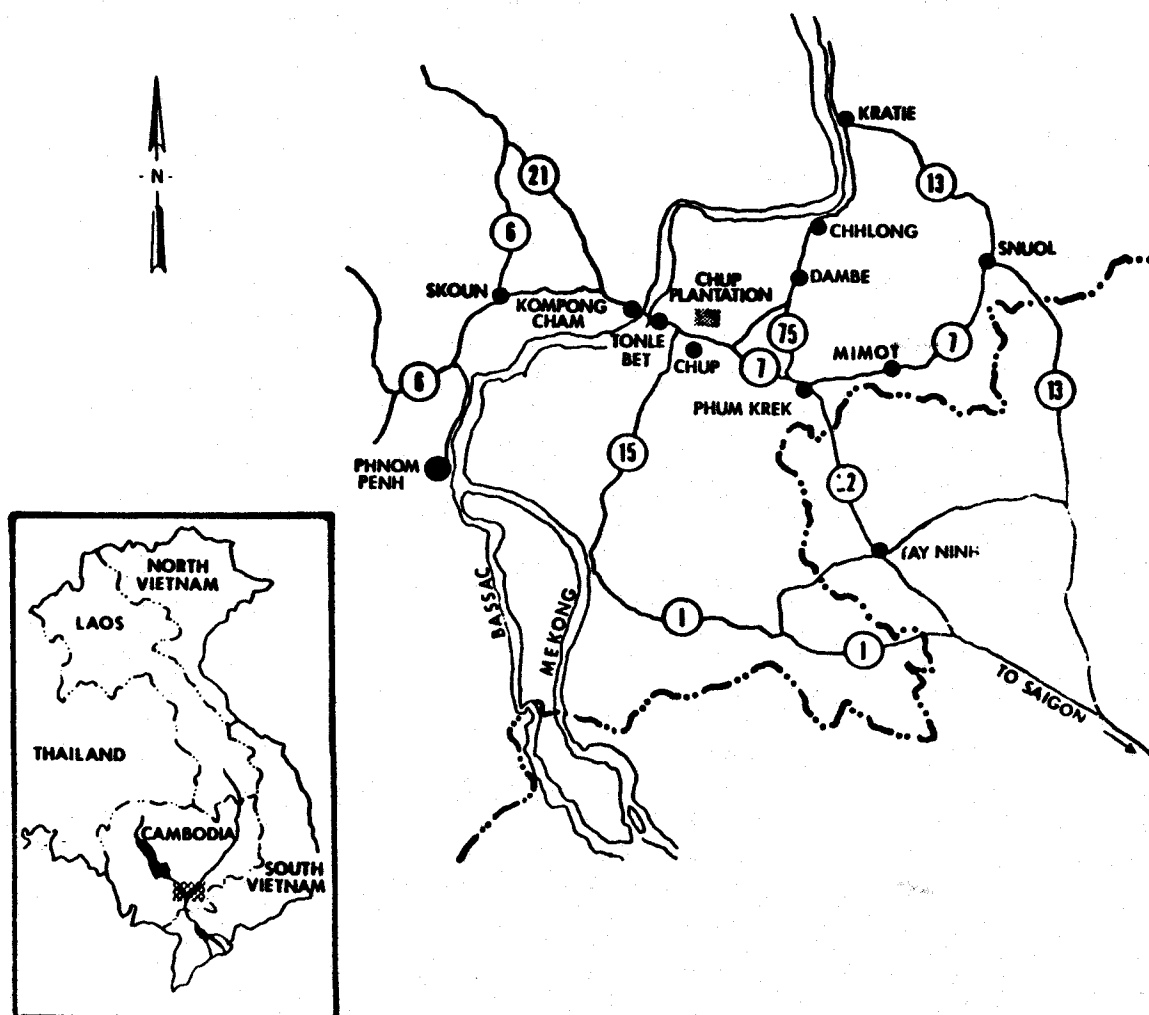
#### Air Operations in Cambodia

● The expanded U.S. air assistance directed by the Administration in January brought aerial activity in Cambodia to its highest level since the incursion of June 1970. Its immediate aim was to help lift the threats from various directions on the capital of Phnom Penh, and to support a Cambodian-South Vietnamese operation trying to open Route 4 from the port of Kompong Som to the capital. USAF forward air controller FACs directed tactical air and AC-119 gunship strikes in direct support of Cambodian and South Vietnamese ground forces.

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OPERATION TOAN THANG 01/71  
AREA OF OPERATION  
(1971)



Source: JGS/RVNAF

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In addition, B-52 bombers made over 100 raids a month into Cambodia during the spring months to support Forces Armees National Klemeres (FANK)--The Cambodian Army. During January alone, the USAF flew a total of 4,776 and the VNAF, 1,400, sorties in Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> On 12 January, (COMUSMACV), Gen. Creighton Abrams, Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam implemented a combined Mekong Convoy Security Plan, by which convoys under USAF, U.S. Army (USA), U.S. Navy (USN), and later VNAF, aerial escort--all controlled by the Seventh Air Force--became the major source of resupply for Phnom Penh.<sup>8</sup>

( ) The Air Force also provided support for a major joint Cambodian-South Vietnamese operation (Toan Thang 01-71) aimed at disrupting enemy efforts to reestablish sanctuaries along the Mekong in the Cambodia-South Vietnam border areas. In December 1970 MACV had asked--and got--support from Admiral John S. McCain, Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), for this operation and it began in January 1971. Seven Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) battalions participated, aided by U.S. troop lifts, tactical air, fixed wing and helicopter gunships, and B-52 air strikes.<sup>9</sup> All air strike authorizations had already been extended in December 1970 to 1 May 1971.<sup>10</sup> Later, in April, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) ordered them further extended,<sup>11</sup> and also changed the rules of engagement to permit ground fire to be returned in all areas where USAF strikes were authorized.<sup>12</sup>

During the first weeks of Operation Toan Thang, there was only light contact with the enemy but in mid-March a 2-day battle erupted in the Chup plantation area. ARVN artillery, U.S. helicopter gunships, USAF and VNAF tactical air and B-52 strikes provided support, and the enemy sustained heavy losses, including some 400 personnel reported killed by air strikes.<sup>13</sup> In operations around Snuol in May, the enemy routed the South Vietnamese, but lost many of his own men, including some 500 presumed killed by air.<sup>14</sup> In late September the enemy initiated carefully prepared attacks against fire bases in the Krek area. But reinforced ARVN forces, with heavy fire support, forced him to withdraw with significant losses. The fire support

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consisted of 89 B-52 strikes, 1,156 USAF tactical air sorties, 1,398 VNAF tactical air sorties, 3,689 U.S. helicopter gunship sorties, 4,800 U.S. artillery rounds and 153,760 ARVN rounds.<sup>15</sup> In mid-December B-52 and tactical air strikes enabled ARVN elements to break through stubborn enemy positions around Route 6 north of Phnom Penh and continue operations in the Chup area. But at year's end the road remained partially under enemy control.

(S) The use of air in Cambodia was of great help to the defending forces, but it could not by itself determine the outcome of the fighting, particularly in view of the low military capability of the Cambodian forces. A CINCPAC assessment, made in May, noted that a major weakness in effectively applying available air power was the Cambodian army's lack of necessary sophistication in developing and exploiting enemy targets, with the result that lucrative opportunities were overlooked.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, General Abrams considered that tactical air and B-52 sorties had produced significant results.<sup>17</sup> The combined use of air and allied ground force operations had not halted the advance of enemy troops, but it had upset their time-tables and helped stabilize the military and political situation in Cambodia.<sup>18</sup>

#### Laos: Lam Son 719

(S) The 1971 military operation involving the greatest use of U.S. air in support of the President's interdiction strategy was the Lam Son 719 operation against the enemy buildup in Laos. As in the Cambodian incursion the year before, the aim was to cut off the enemy's supplies and reinforcements to prevent a potential offensive. In late 1970 and early 1971 there had again been sharp increases in the supplies moving into the enemy's southern Laos base areas around Tchepone and even into the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Intelligence agents reported an intended enemy move in late January against the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam: Quang Tri and Thua Thien. To meet this threat--since U.S. ground troops were forbidden to go into Laos and were, moreover, rapidly redeploying--South Vietnamese forces undertook a large-scale ground offensive, with U.S. forces providing aviation, airlift, and most of the firepower. The

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President granted approval for this action in early January. \*<sup>19</sup>

(U) Three ARVN divisions participated in Operation Lam Son 719, and the U.S. Army's XXIV Corps provided them supporting fire and helicopter support. In charge of the entire Lam Son ground campaign was Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the commanding general of ARVN's I Corps. General Creighton W. Abrams commanded all U.S. forces involved, assisted by separate air and ground commanders. <sup>20</sup>

#### Air Support

● A separate direct air support center, DASC Victor, established at XXIV Corps Headquarters at Quang Tri, served the tactical air control parties (TACPs) at each of the three ARVN division tactical operations centers. Seventh Air Force, which prepared the air support package, had direct control of tactical air operations. <sup>21</sup> It sent a liaison officer to familiarize the XXIV Corps staff with B-52 operating and targeting procedures, and arranged to forward Seventh Air Force intelligence target nominations. After the RVNAF entered Laos, Lieutenant General Lam, Commander of the RVNAF forces, personally selected almost all the B-52 targets for the sorties allocated to Lam Son 719 by MACV. <sup>22</sup>

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\* There was apparently some uncertainty at the outset concerning Lam Son 719. Although JCS approved it and stipulated operational authorities on 19 January, the Laotian Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the State Department opposed it and on 27 January, MACV recommended cancellation. CINCPAC concurred with MACV, with reservations along purely military lines. JCS thereupon asked MACV for a recommendation for the operation based on military considerations alone. MACV, with strong CINCPAC concurrence, then recommended the operation go on as scheduled. JCS approved execution on 28 January and it began on the 29th. (CINCPAC Command History 1971 (TS), Vol I, pp 182-3).

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On 30 January, U. S. ground forces launched an attack towards the Laotian border to set up forward logistical bases at Khe Sanh and Vandegrift base camp for prestocking fuel and munitions for U. S. helicopter operations, and to construct an assault airstrip. The employment of helicopters was critical in the Lam Son 719 plan. They were the basic mode of transportation, the three ARVN divisions being completely dependent--for the first time in the war--upon helicopters for assault, resupply, and extraction. Before the operation ended, over 27,000 sorties were flown. 23

The actual "invasion" began on 8 February preceded by eleven B-52 strikes and massive artillery fire preparing the way for the ARVN thrust into Laos. \* U. S. aircraft, both Army and Air Force, continued to support the South Vietnamese as they moved into the Laotian panhandle towards the major traffic hub of Tchepone. B-52s bombed the landing zones before ARVN troops made their helicopter assaults, the latter were accompanied by tactical air strikes to help suppress enemy attacks. Sometimes, just before the helicopter assault, tactical air elements laid down smoke screens interspersed with casualty-producing cluster bomb unit (CBU) munitions. The USAF also employed 15,000 lb bombs, using 6 of them to blast out helicopter landing zones and 19 against large mass targets such as suspected troop concentrations and storage areas. 24 Throughout, to reduce the combat effectiveness of the North Vietnamese Army in the Lam Son 719 area, an extensive air interdiction effort struck enemy trucks, supply and storage areas.

The daily number of tactical air sorties during Lam Son 719 ranged from just over 100 on 8 February to a high of 337 on 10 March. A total of 8,512 tactical air sorties, / 1,358 B-52

\* See Appendix III for an account of the earlier "secret" B-52 bombings over Laos.

/ This included more than 24,000 fighter passes against targets well defended by AAA weapons. The Air Force lost 6 aircraft during the operations: three F-4s, one F-100D, one A-1H, and one O-2A. (Proj CHECO rpt on Lam Son 719, p 121.)

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sorties, and 2,809 tactical airlift sorties supported the operation. During peak periods fighter activity surged to a rate of 1.5 sorties a day per aircraft and for a week during March the U. S. Navy augmented these strikes with planes from three carriers off Yankee Station. Most of the supporting U. S. air forces were diverted from the Commando Hunt V interdiction campaign in the Steel Tiger area of southern Laos.<sup>25</sup> They made a major shift in turning from interdiction to close air support, since only about 10% of their strike sorties had previously been in the ground support role. This shift lowered the interdiction effort in other parts of the Ho Chi Minh trail, but the heavy concentration of enemy trucks and supplies in the Lam Son area provided an abundance of lucrative targets. The 1,433 sorties flown against vehicles in the Lam Son area reportedly destroyed 1,539 and damaged 485. <sup>26</sup> The VNAF also flew 230 close air support sorties during March and provided limited helicopter troop airlift. However, most VNAF resources were used in South Vietnam and Cambodia during this period. <sup>27</sup>

#### ARVN Dependence on Air

☛ The ARVN forces relied heavily on U. S. firepower not only to destroy enemy installations and troop concentrations, but to defend their positions and fight their battles. Thus, while B-52s at the outset struck selected targets such as artillery emplacements, storage areas, and suspected troop positions, from about mid-February on, they increasingly supported ARVN troops in contact. The latter devised various tactics for making use of this support. For example, units of the 1st Infantry Division would request a B-52 strike on a target area where enemy troops were deployed, engage the latter in combat and then, about half an hour before the scheduled time-over-target for the B-52s, withdraw. The Commander of the Division, Brig. Gen. Phan Van Phu reported: <sup>28</sup>

The enemy tries to get very close to us, hoping we will get hit by one of our own bombs. We let them come close, then pull back just before the

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air strikes, closing again when the bombers have finished. If you want to kill people, you must use maximum air... During the heavy fighting around Fire Support Base (FSB) Lo Lo.. I called for B-52 strikes within 300 yards of my unit. Many of the nearly 1,700 enemy soldiers reported killed in that fighting died in those strikes.

General Abrams also leaned heavily on the B-52s, particularly as the action intensified in the latter half of February. On 17 February, he renewed an earlier request for a new special B-52 operating area around Tchepone, that would lower the bombing restrictions from 3,000 to 1,500 meters on six POW sites nearby. The U. S. Ambassador to Laos, G. McMurtrie Godley, opposed this, but CINCPAC supported Abrams, and JCS (reporting concurrence by the Secretaries of State and Defense) recommended 1,000 meters as adequate restriction and approved the bombing "without question." On 20 February the Ambassador concurred and CINCPAC immediately confirmed the change, to apply only during Lam Son 719 however.<sup>29</sup> At the request of MACV and CINCPAC, B-52 sorties supporting Lam Son 719 increased from 1,000 to 1,200 a month beginning 24 February. On the 25th MACV also asked that B-52 weapon loadings be increased from the standard 66, to 108 bombs (84 Mk-82s and 24 M-117s) per sortie to increase weapon fragmentation effects on troop concentrations. Both the higher B-52 sortie rate and the increased bomb loads continued, at the request of the field commanders, through 31 May.\*<sup>30</sup>

As enemy pressure mounted, the number of U.S. tactical air sorties against enemy personnel rose to a high of 185 on 17 March and most enemy attacks were broken off only by repeated, accurate tactical air strikes on their troops.<sup>31</sup> Of the 13,642 enemy troops which the RVNAF reported killed during the operation, some 4,300 were attributed to aerial activity. However, this figure may have been in fact higher since ground sweeps were conducted only in a very small percentage of the

\* The Air Force wanted to reduce both the sorties and the bomb loads sooner (see pp 75-76).



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areas struck.<sup>32</sup> These heavy enemy losses occurred mainly when he massed his forces to attack.

(C) The North Vietnamese were strong and well equipped-- as well as possibly well-informed about Lam Son 719 by agents within ARVN and the Saigon government. As the campaign went on, despite their heavy losses to air attacks, they were able to inflict mounting casualties on the South Vietnamese, forcing their drive to bog down. Whereupon General Lam ordered a withdrawal on 17 March under cover of tactical air and U. S. artillery fire. An ARVN armored force of 100 tanks and heavy tracked vehicles succeeded in fighting its way out of Laos, but the ARVN retreat as a whole became disordered in the face of heavy enemy ground fire, and tactical air and B-52 strikes intervened to inflict heavy losses on the enemy. U. S. helicopters, with some difficulty, extracted many of the ARVN units.<sup>33</sup> Other air strikes destroyed abandoned heavy equipment left behind by the South Vietnamese to keep it from falling into enemy hands.<sup>34</sup>

(C) It was not without reason that General Abrams called air operations during Lam Son 719 the most significant single tactical air-ground support activity during 1971.<sup>35</sup> The air role throughout was unanimously acclaimed and dependence on it was always evident. Taking RVNAF forces deep into an enemy area by helicopter to landing zones near Tchepone would have been virtually impossible without intensive prepping by tactical air and B-52s. And once arrived, these forces, outnumbered and on unfriendly, unfamiliar terrain, could not have survived without the help of tactical air, gunships, and B-52s--and the tactical airlift support which kept them maneuverable in the sustained ground combat.<sup>36</sup>

(C) Another crucial contribution of tactical air was suppression of enemy aircraft weapons--artillery, machine guns, small arms, mortars, rockets and grenades -- which assailed the

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helicopters. \* MACV lists 102 helicopters lost, 601 damaged. But, as the authors of the Project CHECO study of Lam Son 719 commented, "it is awesome to imagine what the losses would have been without AA suppression."\*\*<sup>37</sup> During the campaign, tactical air strikes destroyed 109 AA sites and damaged 18.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic contribution of air was its use against enemy armor. The enemy had deployed a whole regiment of some 120 tanks and of these, tactical air strikes destroyed a total of 74 and damaged 24.<sup>39</sup> In the last days of the campaign, the enemy made a concentrated effort to cut off retreating RVNAF forces with the tanks, but tactical fighter strikes, knocking out many of them or forcing them to cover, thwarted the plan. In both antiaircraft suppression and anti-armor operations, the laser-guided Pave-way bomb was extremely accurate and effective.<sup>40</sup>

#### Controversies over Helicopters and Air Support

■ The Lam Son 719 operation brought up some old controversies about the U. S. Army's use of helicopters and the close air support role. An 11 March New York Times story by Drew Middleton quoted "infantry officers in Washington, Fort Bragg, N. C., and Fort Carson, Col., all with experience in Vietnam," as suggesting that "the helicopter had been oversold in one of its roles, that of gunship supporting ground troops." To some

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\* Small arms and automatic weapons--not the sophisticated AAA weapons--were responsible for 618 of the 695 hits reported on helicopters. The largest number of hits were taken by the UH-1Hs, which carried the troops, and the AH-1G which flew gunship escorts. [See Col J. F. Loye, Jr., Maj. G. K. St. Clair, Maj L. J. Johnson, Mr. J. W. Dennison, Lam Son 719, 30 Jan-24 February (S)(Hq PACAF, Project CHECO, 24 Mar 71), pp 89-110.]

\*\* The figures given by the authors of the Proj CHECO study (p xvi) are "an estimated 200-plus helicopters destroyed, plus several hundred damaged."

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Air Force analysts, it was a case of the Army stubbornly depending on its own organic helicopters to the point of sustaining heavy losses before calling on the Air Force for tactical air support.<sup>41</sup> Thus, reminiscent of earlier operations with high helicopter losses in 1964 and 1965, the Lam Son operation undertook a helicopter assault on a landing zone in Laos on 3 March which cost the Army 7 helicopters destroyed, 42 hit, and 20 declared nonflyable. After this incident, General Abrams directed closer coordination of landing zone preparations with the result that when the next ARVN battalions moved into the area, tactical air sorties in support of ground forces more than doubled previous ones.<sup>42</sup>

MACV later conceded that airmobile operations had encountered heavy small arms fire, antiaircraft weapons, and mortar and artillery fire, but maintained that the helicopters had proved survivable in the "mid-intensity" air defense environment in Lam Son 719.<sup>43</sup> The Air Force analysts did not agree. They pointed to the high helicopter losses, suggesting the Army had not sufficiently heeded Seventh Air Force's warning about the AA threat in the Lao Panhandle, and insisted enemy antiaircraft activity had drastically disrupted the helicopters' operations.<sup>44</sup> Both the Air Force and the Army agreed afterwards that future operations of this nature required a higher degree of coordination and prior planning.<sup>45</sup>

Operation Lam Son 719 was controversial in other ways. Some South Vietnamese said the operation fell short of its goals because of a lack of American air and helicopter support. Brig Gen Phan Van Phu, commander of the First Infantry Division, according to a news report from Saigon, repeatedly said he did not receive the tactical air support he had anticipated and that even if he had, it would not have been enough. One of his aides added "We went in with fewer troops than the enemy and counted on American planes to make up the difference. Candidly, I must say, the Americans let us down."<sup>46</sup> Some Americans suggested that the operation failed when President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam refused to commit additional troops to it, and American pilots and advisers said the South Vietnamese did not know how to guide air strikes and

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often endangered pilots by directing them into antiaircraft fire.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, the fact that General Lam took his orders only from President Thieu and did not always coordinate his moves with XXIV Corps and Seventh Air Force representatives, did not make for insuring the most effective air support.<sup>48</sup>

One news correspondent (Alvin Shuster for the New York Times) wrote somewhat heatedly about the "supplemental" U. S. air role: "It's as if an investor says you put up \$10 and I'll supplement it with \$15,000." He said: "There is no doubt that the whole operation could not have occurred if it were not for the American war planes overhead."<sup>49</sup> The authors of the Project CHECO study on Lam Son 719 said that "although it has never appeared in an official report on the operation, without the air superiority provided by the U. S. Air Force over the battlefield, there could have been no Lam Son 719."<sup>50</sup> General John D. Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff, was more diplomatic. Praising the role of the USAF in Laos, he said that to contend that air power prevented "a catastrophe," would be:

...a gross exaggeration and a narrow view. The operation wouldn't have been planned at all without the availability of our tactical air support and our B-52s. It was known from the beginning that the use of air power was necessary. The ground troops would have had difficulty without it.<sup>51</sup>

#### The Public vs the Administration on Use of Air

(U) As in the case of the Cambodian incursion, so in Operation Lam Son 719, there was considerable domestic apprehension and outcry that the Administration was expanding the war, including speculation that South Vietnamese invasion of North Vietnam would come next. Massive new protests were held in Washington and elsewhere. The President's answer was to equate the Lam Son operation with the Cambodian invasion of 1970. As the latter had cut off one enemy lifeline, this would cut off another--both buying time for the United States and South Vietnam and facilitating faster U. S. withdrawal.<sup>52</sup>

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(U) Mr. Nixon argued that it was necessary to shield U.S. withdrawal by launching sweeps against future enemy buildups, and to employ the air weapon as needed. <sup>53</sup> He cited the large amount of ammunition and equipment captured or destroyed and argued that, "there has been a 55% decrease in truck traffic south into South Vietnam." The Laos venture, he said, would save lives in 1971 by destroying equipment that might have moved into I Corps, and would serve to guarantee the continued U.S. withdrawal. He noted the enemy's superiority in troop strength in Laos, and restated that it was necessary for South Vietnam to have U.S. air support in order to equalize that difference. <sup>54</sup>

(U) Secretary Laird and other officials backed the President up. Secretary of State Rogers said: <sup>55</sup>

We do not rule out the use of air power to support Asians in any effort that they make to fight a common enemy. There is one enemy in Indochina. That's North Vietnam, and it is invading Laos, and Cambodia, and South Vietnam. And the Asians are fighting that common enemy, and we are going to provide whatever air power is necessary to protect our men while we are withdrawing from South Vietnam.

Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the JCS, gave the most explicit justification for using air in the Laos operation: <sup>56</sup>

Here again our use of air power in support of the South Vietnamese is in accord with the Nixon Doctrine and is linked directly to our Vietnamization objectives. I am of the firm opinion that any restriction in our use of air power in Laos, Cambodia, or Vietnam would cause a stretchout in the time required for the South Vietnamese and the Cambodians to fully develop their defenses.

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This, in turn, would stretch out the time required to achieve Vietnamization and disengage U. S. forces...

I said at the time, and I will say again now, that the use of airpower in Cambodia, as in South Vietnam and in Laos, is the best means to exploit our technological advantage and achieve our objectives with minimum casualties. Our objectives are to prevent the enemy from re-establishing his supply routes and sanctuaries and prevent him from gaining a favorable position from which he could threaten allied forces in South Vietnam.

(U) Despite all the official vindications and even optimism, Lam Son 719 could not but have chilled Administration hopes for Vietnamization. Because the South Vietnamese could not duplicate the sophisticated U. S. air interdiction capabilities to stop enemy infiltration, most efforts to "Vietnamize" this function had centered on substituting RVNAF ground force interdiction. But Lam Son 719--planned as a ground interdiction operation par excellence--did little to sustain this thesis. Indeed, its unfavorable outcome may have been a major reason that the Administration continued to insist so strongly on the legitimacy of its use of U. S. air power. More than ever, it remained the only alternative.

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## II. THE ENEMY CHALLENGE

(U) Besides using air power against enemy forces and supply buildups in Cambodia and Laos, the President in 1971 authorized resumption of air attacks against North Vietnam. Initially these "protective reaction" strikes, as they were called, were directed primarily at SAM sites, but their scope broadened as the year went on. The expanding attacks provoked much comment in the press, with strong criticism of U.S. policy for escalating the war. The troop withdrawals of 1969-1970 had created a general public impression that the United States was getting out of the war entirely and the renewed air attacks brought severe criticism of the President's willful use of force. The facts were not that simple.

Enemy Efforts to Counter U.S. Air

(U) As 1971 progressed, it became ever clearer that North Vietnam, while decreasing its ground actions, was continuing buildup efforts for an offensive and in particular was increasing its efforts to counter U.S. air power. There were obvious reasons for this. President Nixon had repeatedly said U.S. air power would continue to be used "as long as necessary." Thus, despite ground withdrawals, the United States had in air power a very effective remaining weapon, especially against the launching of any successful offensive. Time and again the B-52s had hamstrung enemy battle plans and nullified their combat efforts, and American planes constantly destroyed their south-bound supplies and reinforcements. If future offensives were to succeed, it was necessary to counter U.S. air activity. Now, with U.S. ground troops constantly receding, the enemy could push his anti-air activities ever farther south with decreasing risk. He could also afford to be bolder in view of the accelerating U.S. air redeployments of which he was undoubtedly aware. North Vietnam's efforts to counter U.S. air took two main directions: stepping up offensive action by its air force, and

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greatly increasing air defense activities with SAMs and AAA weapons. These new enemy efforts clearly required, in turn, stronger, U. S. defensive measures to protect allied air operations.

Before November 1970, the North Vietnamese Air Force (NVAF) had kept its planes securely up in the north, seldom venturing beyond the country's borders. Thereafter it began not only to deploy planes farther south but even to fly them outside the country. MIGs began penetrating Lao airspace, and in April and May 1971 they made several passes at FAC aircraft. They also began deploying to airfields in the southernmost part of North Vietnam--Vinh, Quan Lang, and Bai Thuong.<sup>1</sup> On 17 March, USAF reconnaissance photography showed that the North Vietnamese had resurfaced the runway at Quan Lang with steel planking, giving them an all-weather capability below 190° North and increasing the MIG threat to Steel Tiger interdiction operations in the Laotian panhandle. They had also deployed a new ground-controlled intercept site that extended their warning and intercept capability as far south as Hue in South Vietnam and Tchepone in Laos.<sup>2</sup>

Concurrently, Hanoi intensified its AAA and SAM activity against U. S. air operations. Photography on 5 January showed eight 85-mm guns in the Sam Neua area of Laos near the North Vietnamese border, and two high-threat areas of 100-mm guns--intended especially to harass B-52s--in the Ban Karai Pass area and possibly in Mu Gia Pass and southeast of Tchepone as well. On 12 May, MACV announced that five F-4s, fired on by 85-mm guns while flying over Laos, knocked out 13 anti-aircraft guns (eight 57-mm and five 37-mm guns) near the Mu Gia Pass in North Vietnam in less than an hour.<sup>3</sup> The enemy also increased his use of modified ground-to-ground rockets to harass gunships and their escorts<sup>4</sup> and, according to U. S. field commanders, moved some twelve 122-mm artillery pieces into the central part of the DMZ contrary to the agreement on keeping forces out of this area.<sup>5</sup>



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### The U. S. Response

Increased SA-2 deployments to lower North Vietnam were another major disruptive factor. On 1 January, SA-2s fired at B-52s making interdiction strikes near Ban Karai Pass, and again on 15 and 16 February in the same area. On 25 February they fired at a flight of Navy A-7s. The U. S. response was a reinforced protective reaction strike into lower North Vietnam called "Louisville Slugger." This was a Seventh Air Force operation, aimed almost exclusively at SAM sites. It made 67 strike sorties on 20, 21, and 28 February, destroying or damaging five SA-2s, 15 SA-2 transporters, and 14 vehicles.<sup>6</sup>

In March, reconnaissance discovered four SAM sites in Laos and during the month the enemy fired 21 of these missiles at U. S. aircraft. One of them downed an RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) Canberra southeast of the DMZ on the 14th, another hit an F-4 over Tchepone on the 19th, and on the 22nd, a third downed one of a flight of four F-4s escorting a photo reconnaissance mission near Dong Hoi in North Vietnam. A cell of B-52s striking a target southwest of the DMZ also reported being fired on by two SA-2s on 17 March.<sup>7</sup> In response to these attacks, the U. S. government ordered a protective reaction strike, "Fracture Cross Alpha," on 21 and 22 March against missile sites about 175 miles inside North Vietnam. Seventh Air Force and Navy Task Force 77 aircraft, each striking within their assigned target areas, flew a total of 234 strike and 30 armed reconnaissance sorties.

(U) The intensified North Vietnamese action against U. S. air operations during February and March had been directed primarily at U. S. air activity in support of Lam Son 719, as Secretary Laird publicly acknowledged when he announced the "Fracture Cross Alpha" strike. Pointing out how the North Vietnamese in the last 4 or 5 weeks had fired SAMs across the DMZ for the first time since the November 1968 bombing

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halt, he attributed this vehement enemy reaction "to the United States aircraft flying in Laos . . . in support of [Lam Son 719]. . . ." Despite the U.S. counter strikes, the North Vietnamese continued to move their SAMs closer to the DMZ and the Lao border and to bring pressure to bear on air operations supporting Lam Son 719.<sup>8</sup>

(S) CINCPAC, apprehensive over the increased MIG and enemy AAA activity, wanted to take counter measures to insure the safety of reconnaissance forces and of friendly air forces in adjacent Laos and South Vietnam. On 1 April he asked expanded authority to engage MIGs whenever they (1) operated on NVN below 20° North latitude, (2) were on the ground in NVN below this line, and (3) operated within 20 nautical miles of the Barrel Roll East area of Laos. He also asked authority to permit pre-emptive strikes against detected SAM/AAA installations and equipment below 19° North in North Vietnam, and follow-on strikes on such sites of up to 70 hours, extended to one week if weather precluded earlier strikes. Higher authority denied approval. Two weeks later, on April 14 and again on 1 May and 14 May, CINCPAC repeated his request in regard to the MIGs but each time met with disapproval. In addition, on 25 April and again in May, with the SAM/AAA build-up continuing, CINCPAC asked for authority to attack these targets and was strongly supported by the JCS. But, as JCS subsequently reported, "higher authority had carefully considered the factors involved and determined that it would be inappropriate to conduct the SAM strikes at the time."<sup>10</sup> Throughout the spring and into the summer, all such requests for countermeasures were disapproved. Turning down another one in late July, the JCS said: "as stated previously in similar circumstances by the SECDEF on 15 and 19 May and 17 June, existing authorities are considered to be adequate."<sup>11</sup>

(S) On 1 August, General Abrams told the newly arrived Seventh Air Force Commander, to arm his escorts with sufficient force to protect U.S. aircraft and to achieve the impact desired for a fully punitive response to enemy air defense tactics under current authorities. He further advised that "interlocking and mutually supporting NVN air defenses constitute an unacceptable hazard to air crews typing to identify a particular SAM/AAA firing site" and

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that it was "considered appropriate for escort forces to direct immediate protective reaction strikes against any identifiable element of the firing/activated air defense complex." <sup>12</sup>

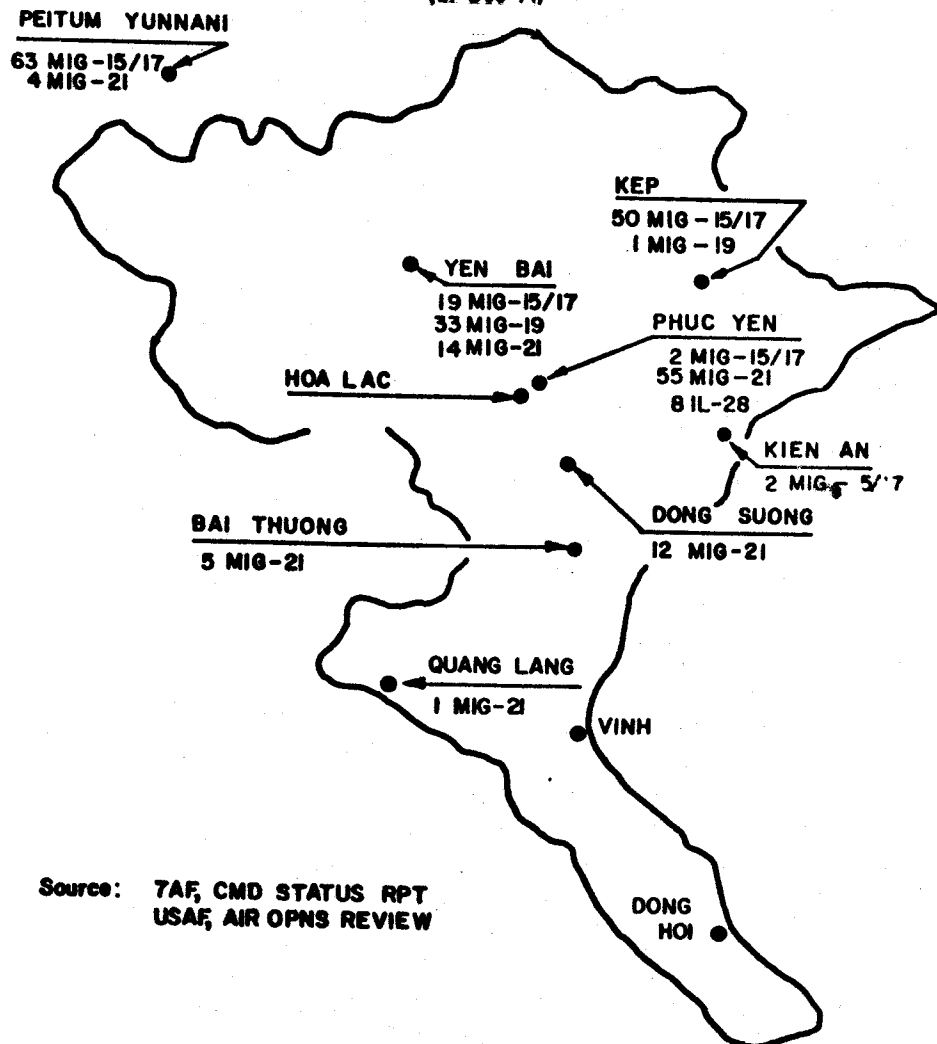
#### Hanoi Steps up its Counter Air Campaign

During the latter half of 1971 the North Vietnamese campaign against the U.S. air became more and more apparent. For the first time during the rainy season they maintained MIGs south of 20° North, primarily at Bai Thuong. <sup>13</sup> They built four small hangers at Quang Lang airfield, improved the runways at Na San and Dien Bien Phu, and extended the runway at Dong Hoi to 7,500 feet. By the end of the rainy season they could launch jet attacks from four airfields south of 20° North. MIG pilots were training in ground support operations and intercept tactics for slow-moving aircraft. <sup>14</sup> Although the North Vietnamese Air Force possessed roughly the same number of MIGs as in 1969, the NVAF had carefully protected them in northern North Vietnam. Now they boldly moved them farther south, and during September and October they also returned to North Vietnam some 30 MIGs that had been located in southern China for several years. <sup>15</sup> During the last half of 1971, the MIGs operated from bases near the DMZ (Bai Thuong, Vinh, and Quang Lang), from which they could penetrate the DMZ in less than 17 minutes. <sup>16</sup> In addition, operating from Yen Bai and Phuc Yen airfields northwest of Hanoi, they could easily reach targets in northeastern Laos (the Barrel Roll area) with intercept Allied aircraft and little or no detection by friendly air defense radar and remain under ground-controlled intercept (GCI) throughout the attacks. Their GCI sites at Moc Chaun, Cam Quang and Ba Don provided radar intercept capabilities which, at 25,000 feet, extended into the Plain of Jars, into most of Steel Tiger and well into Military Region I of South Vietnam. <sup>17</sup> Likewise, instead of moving their SAM sites back north during the rainy season as they had done before, the North Vietnamese left them in place and brought additional ones

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# JET AIR ORDER OF BATTLE NORTH VIETNAM

(31 Dec 71)



Source: 7AF, CMD STATUS RPT  
USAF, AIR OPNS REVIEW

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southward. <sup>18</sup> Seventh Air Force Intelligence believed that many of the anti-aircraft guns too were placed in storage this time rather than returned to North Vietnam. <sup>19</sup>

● The North Vietnamese at this time also continued work on two petroleum pipeline systems, one entering Laos through the Mu Gia Pass and another just north of the DMZ. According to agent reports, they had even built warehouses in the DMZ and in Quang Tri Province, and further south in western Thua Thien Province were distributing supplies entering from Laos to their units as needed. <sup>20</sup> They also expanded their road construction and extended NVN Route 103 across the DMZ down into MR-1 of South Vietnam, significantly reducing transit time for supplies as well as exposure to air interdiction attacks. Seventh Air Force seeded segments of this road with munitions and emplaced sensors along it and in August flew 473 strike sorties to destroy it. Despite the problems and delays this caused, the North Vietnamese continued work on the road up to 26 September after which date reconnaissance detected no further construction. \* <sup>21</sup>

● By September 1971, as the approaching dry season permitted more air activity, MACV began to realize the extent of enemy intentions against Allied planes, and he directed additional "protective reaction" strikes by U. S. aircraft. <sup>22</sup> Normally these were strikes against enemy positions by reconnaissance aircraft or by F-105G SAM-suppression aircraft. A few of them like Louisville Slugger in January and Fracture Cross Alpha in March (see pp 28-29) had been major, pre-planned strikes, authorized from Washington. On 21 September another major air strike, called Operation Prize Bull, with a broadened objective beyond retaliation was authorized. During this operation, 196 aircraft struck three POL storage areas

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\* According to a news report, North Vietnamese engineers were planning to use stretches of old American military road between Khe Sanh and the DMZ, bulldozed out of the jungle for support of Lam Son 719, to push their road forward into South Vietnam. (Washington Post, 18 Sep 71, rpt from Quang Tri by Jack Foisie.)

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within 35 miles of the DMZ, at Thu Thu, An Bo, and Xuan Duc just south of Dong Hoi. The strikes destroyed an estimated 470,000 gallons of storage capacity and started several fires that burned two days or more, dealing the enemy's dry season logistic effort a major blow.<sup>23</sup> Because of poor weather conditions, Prize Bull was the first all-instrument strike of such magnitude ever conducted using the Loran bombing system exclusively.<sup>24</sup>

(U) Like the other major protective reaction strikes, Operation Prize Bull caused much speculation and comment in the press both at home and abroad. Two days after the original communique, ascribing the strike to retaliation against SAMs, MACV headquarters in Saigon acknowledged it had also been directed against fuel storage facilities.<sup>25</sup> On the same day, Presidential Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler said the raid had been personally ordered by the President, "to protect American troops as they withdrew from Vietnam."<sup>26</sup> Questions at new briefings, however, established that the Administration was using major protective reaction strikes of this kind to keep North Vietnam off balance and prevent a buildup for an offensive. "Essentially, we're hitting targets of opportunity as they present themselves," one Pentagon official explained, "with an eye toward stopping any major buildup before it develops." Jerry W. Friedheim, the Pentagon press spokesman, asked earlier if current policy provided that "whenever there is a heavy enemy buildup, go up and bomb it," replied, "That's it."<sup>27</sup> In other words, interdiction bombing of the North had in effect resumed.

(S) But the North Vietnamese did not take this lying down. As the winter months approached, they increased their concentrations of SAMs and antiaircraft guns, not only to protect their lines of communications in North Vietnam, but also to shoot down B-52s and other U.S. aircraft. The frequency of trackings by the SAM site radar systems followed by SAM firings at unarmed U.S. reconnaissance aircraft over North Vietnam, grew alarmingly. MIG activity increased at a parallel pace. On 4 October a MIG--in the first such

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attempt--tried to intercept a B-52 cell in the Tchepone area, and on the 13th another MIG penetrated airspace in the Barrel Roll area of Laos.<sup>28</sup> On 9 November, COMUSMACV headquarters in Saigon announced that Air Force and Navy jets had pounded enemy airfields at Dong Hoi, Vinh, and Quang Lang on 7 and 8 November, in retaliation for attacks on U. S. reconnaissance planes.<sup>29</sup> In fact the suspected or potential presence of MIGs at these airfields was the main reason for the attacks. Quang Lang especially--from which four to six MIGs staged regularly--was considered a primary air-to-air threat.<sup>30</sup> Despite the attacks on their airfields, the MIGs continued their activity. On 12 November, a MIG flew over Laos in the Mu Gia Pass area, and there were two more incursions involving two MIGs on 20 November, with one of them firing a missile at a B-52 near Mu Gia Pass.<sup>31</sup>

#### Further Enemy Activity and the U. S. Response

~~(TOP SECRET)~~ As earlier in the year, CINCPAC and MACV had continued to request changes in the rules of engagement to meet the expanding threat, but still met with consistent denial from Washington. All they could do was make maximum use of existing authorities and broaden the interpretations of them.\* They continued to do this, at times stretching the interpretations considerably. Thus, on 22 November, two days after a MIG attempted to shoot down a B-52, Admiral Moorer interpreted hostile intent of enemy aircraft as follows:

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\* The Administration's reluctance to extend the bombing can probably be related both to Henry Kissinger's secret trip to Peking in July and to the sensitive negotiations going on for ending the war. These extremely delicate conversations culminated in the agreement on 25 October between the United States and Hanoi to hold secret talks beginning 20 November.

In my view there is no question that MIG aircraft which depart NVN airfields south of 19° North are suspect and if all source collateral information correlates with B-52 or other U.S. /Allied air operations in NVN/Laos border area this would constitute prima-facie evidence of hostile intent. 32

(TS) By early December, however, the MIG threat to B-52s was such that Gen. Bruce K. Holloway, Commander in Chief SAC, considered grounding them until something was done about protection against the MIGs. 33 As a result, a high level conference was hastily called at Honolulu on 4 and 5 December to deal with this problem. Here Gen. John W. Vogt, Jr., Director of the Joint Staff, urged the field commanders to be more aggressive, more flexible in using existing authorities, and to increase fighter escorts for reconnaissance aircraft, from the current two or four, to 8 or 16 to insure adequate damage on protective reaction strikes. 34 Maximum escorts were to be provided whenever MIGs were present. He told them they could expect full backing from JCS and that the letter would not question aiming points on protective reaction strikes. 35 In December 1971 and January 1972, Seventh Air Force applied this "more vigorous protective reaction posture" adopted by the SEA commanders at the Honolulu conference, and used it to achieve what the JCS referred to as "several highly successful protective reaction strikes." But, although the "spirit" of the regulations appeared relaxed, the "letter" seemed to remain intact. Thus, when General Lavelle discussed the buildup, the MIG incursions, and the new aggressiveness of the North Vietnamese, with Secretary Laird in Saigon in early December /the latter did not offer much real help. He said it was an inopportune time to request additional authorities from Washington, and that the field commanders should make maximum use of existing authorities and he would support them. 36

(TS) The enemy, meanwhile, continued undeterred on his militant path. Between 20 November and the end of December, 18 penetrations involving 24 MIGs occurred in northern Laos, mostly in the Barrel Roll area. On 10 December a SAM fired from within the Mu Gia Pass downed the first F-105G model to be lost in Southeast Asia. On 17 December, SAMs caused the pilot of an Air Force F-4 to lose control of his aircraft and the crew had to eject. 37 Between 1 November and 31 December there were 22 SAM firings--excluding the 45 firings



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in Operation Proud Deep Alpha in late December (see below). During the same period in 1970 there had been only three.<sup>38</sup> On 1 November there were some 345 AAA guns in Laos; by the end of 1971 there were 554. And in a new coordinated ground support emphasis, the enemy moved these guns into the Plain of Jars area in support of the NVA offensive there.<sup>39</sup>

Not surprisingly all this expanded North Vietnamese air defense activity began to deny B-52s, gunships, and FAC aircraft the infiltration areas west of Mu Gia, Ban Karai, and Ban Raving Passes, making U.S. interdiction efforts over the Ho Chi Minh Trail increasingly difficult.<sup>40</sup> Thus, after SAMs fired at attacking B-52s on 9 November, heavy bomber strikes in the Ban Karai Pass were suspended until 20 November, and lighter strike forces alone were unable to keep the roads closed. When the B-52 flights resumed on the 20th, a MIG fired a missile at the first bomber cell, causing other B-52 flights for that day to be diverted.<sup>41</sup> When six SAMs fired at aircraft in the Mu Gia Pass on 10 December B-52 bombing in the passes thereafter was restricted to the DMZ area.<sup>42</sup> The search and rescue effort for the F-4 crews downed on 18 December disrupted Steel Tiger air strikes for several days, and sorties flown for MIG combat air patrol reduced the number of flights available for interdiction. Whenever MIGs appeared on the scene, U.S. fighter-bombers had to jettison bombs and fuel and prepare to fight rather than carry out their bombing missions. And highly concentrated AAA fire in specific, narrowly defined areas often prohibited gunship operations in that area.

(TS) In addition, the North Vietnamese, besides using their GCI radars to guide MIGs on intercepts of U.S. aircraft, had begun to link their GCI radars with SAM sites in a way that permitted SAMs to leave their radars on only a very short time and hence reduced their vulnerability to U.S. antiradiation missiles. Since few U.S. aircraft were equipped to detect GCI tracking as they were SAM tracking, the enemy could aim SAMs undetected until the instant of firing.<sup>44</sup> According to General

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Lavelle, this system eventually accounted for the loss of two aircraft and crews.<sup>45</sup> This new enemy tactic presented one more threat to Seventh Air Force's aerial reconnaissance mission in Route Package 1 as well as to air operations in the border areas of South Vietnam and Laos. It was not until January 1972 that General Abrams, after numerous requests, finally received authority to attack the GCI radars.<sup>46</sup> But in the interim, enemy defensive efforts were becoming a constant hindrance to the interdiction campaign.<sup>47</sup>

#### Operation Proud Deep Alpha

(S) Right after the 20 November MIG attempt against the B-52s, high governmental and military planners decided a countering strike operation had to be undertaken. The Joint Chiefs directed CINCPAC to consolidate two existing plans: Fracture Deep, formulated in July 1971 and Proud Bunch proposed 18 November 1971.<sup>48</sup> The new, revised plan, called "Proud Deep", incorporated the main objectives of the original plans:<sup>49</sup>

- a. Destruction of MIGs on the ground and attainment of a level of damage of Bai Thuong and Quang Lang sufficient to inhibit further use of these bases by the NVAF for MIG operations against B-52s and gunships in Laos.
- b. Destruction of logistical and other military targets in NVN south of 18° North, with priority on targets of greatest importance to the enemy as storage and input elements for his logistics system in Laos.

The decision to go ahead with the plan was still not forthcoming by mid-December, weather being the overriding factor. Meanwhile, between 16-19 December, in separate Barrel Roll air action supporting a desperate stand by General Vang Pao's forces near Long Tien in Laos, three F-4s were lost. Two fell to automatic weapons and AAA fire and the third was evading a SAM.<sup>50</sup> On 18 December a MIG-21 downed the first U.S. aircraft since June 1968, a USAF F-4D flying MIG CAP\* over the north, approximately 70 miles west/northwest of

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\* Anti-MIG Combat Air Patrol

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Bai Thuong.<sup>51</sup> On the same day two USAF F-4s searching for the crew of this downed aircraft were engaged by two MIG-21s, ultimately resulting in the ejection of the two F-4 crew, for lack of fuel, and loss of their aircraft.<sup>52</sup> COMUSMACV immediately forwarded another plea to execute the Proud Deep plan: "In view of recent hostile MIG activity culminating [in the] loss of F-4 aircraft this date, strongly recommend execution Proud Deep." <sup>53</sup>

( ) The Chairman of the JCS, Admiral Moorer, sent the execute authority the next day. It widened the target area to all valid military targets in North Vietnam south of 20° North (rather than just the four airfields and targets south of 18° North as in the original plan) but restricted the duration of the strike to 72 hours rather than the 5 days provided in the plan.<sup>54</sup> Between 26 and 30 December (weather conditions were so bad the 72 hours had to be extended), USAF and USN planes flew 1,025 strike sorties against varied targets in North Vietnam below 20° North.

( ) This operation, re-christened Proud Deep Alpha, was the biggest attack and deepest penetration of North Vietnam since the November 1968 bombing halt. It did not, however, achieve the objectives of destroying MIGs on the ground and inhibiting further use of selected airfields. This was primarily because of consistently poor weather, throughout the five days, which necessitated use of weather bombing systems for a majority of the targets. <sup>55</sup> The destruction of logistical targets--POL dumps, airfields, transportation points, and military complexes--was also not eminently successful, the most significant accomplishment being the destruction or damage of more than 31,000 barrels of POL. <sup>56</sup> The U. S. lost three aircraft, all to SAMs: one USAF F-4, \*and one USN F-4, and one A-6.<sup>57</sup>

\* Commando Hunt VII says the USAF F-4 "was lost to possible AAA during the first day of the operation." It disappeared during AAA fire near Thanh Hoa. There was no contact with the crew. (Commando Hunt VII (S), p 147.)

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Aside from having to depend entirely on instrumental flying, Operation Proud Deep Alpha also suffered from delays and from political constraints. For example, most of the long-awaited good weather fell during holiday cease fires which could not be abrogated. A significant increase in enemy SAM and AAA defenses was a further hindrance--there were 45 confirmed and two possible SAM firings during the 5 day operation.<sup>58</sup> The Air Force nevertheless sought to draw as much profit from the operation as possible. General Lavelle solicited comments and recommendations from his wing commanders for improving future operations of a similar nature. He said that "As long as the possibility remains that we may be directed to go North again and forced to strike IFR (Instrument Flight Rules), we must develop and maintain the best possible capability of performing the task."\*<sup>59</sup>

The MIG incursions continued and intensified in the new year, 1972. By 31 January 1972, U. S. forces had flown 1,933 air defense sorties to counter the MIG threat.<sup>60</sup> In late December 1971 it became apparent that additional warning and surveillance aircraft were required, so CINCPAC approved the deployment

\* JCS had for some time been prepared for having to "go back north" to counter the nightmare possibility the President constantly warned about--that NVN might launch an offensive in SVN as U. S. troop strength declined. CINCPAC, at JCS direction, had forwarded a contingency plan for such an eventuality on 22 October 1970. The JCS revised it to add tactical air to the forces that might be used against NVN, and the new plan, called Fresh Mandate, was promulgated 27 February 1971. In addition, CINCPAC continually reviewed the Rolling Thunder Target List to reflect the current status of North Vietnamese target systems should air strikes against them again be authorized. As of 31 December 1971 he reported there were 340 targets worthy of strike, including 24 air defense, 115 electrical power, 68 military complex, 23 POL storage, 93 transportation, and 17 war-supporting facilities. (CINCPAC Command History 1971 (TS) pp 152, 667.)

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of a College Eye Task Force of four EC-121T aircraft from Kwang Ju Air Base, Korea to Udorn in Thailand. <sup>61</sup>

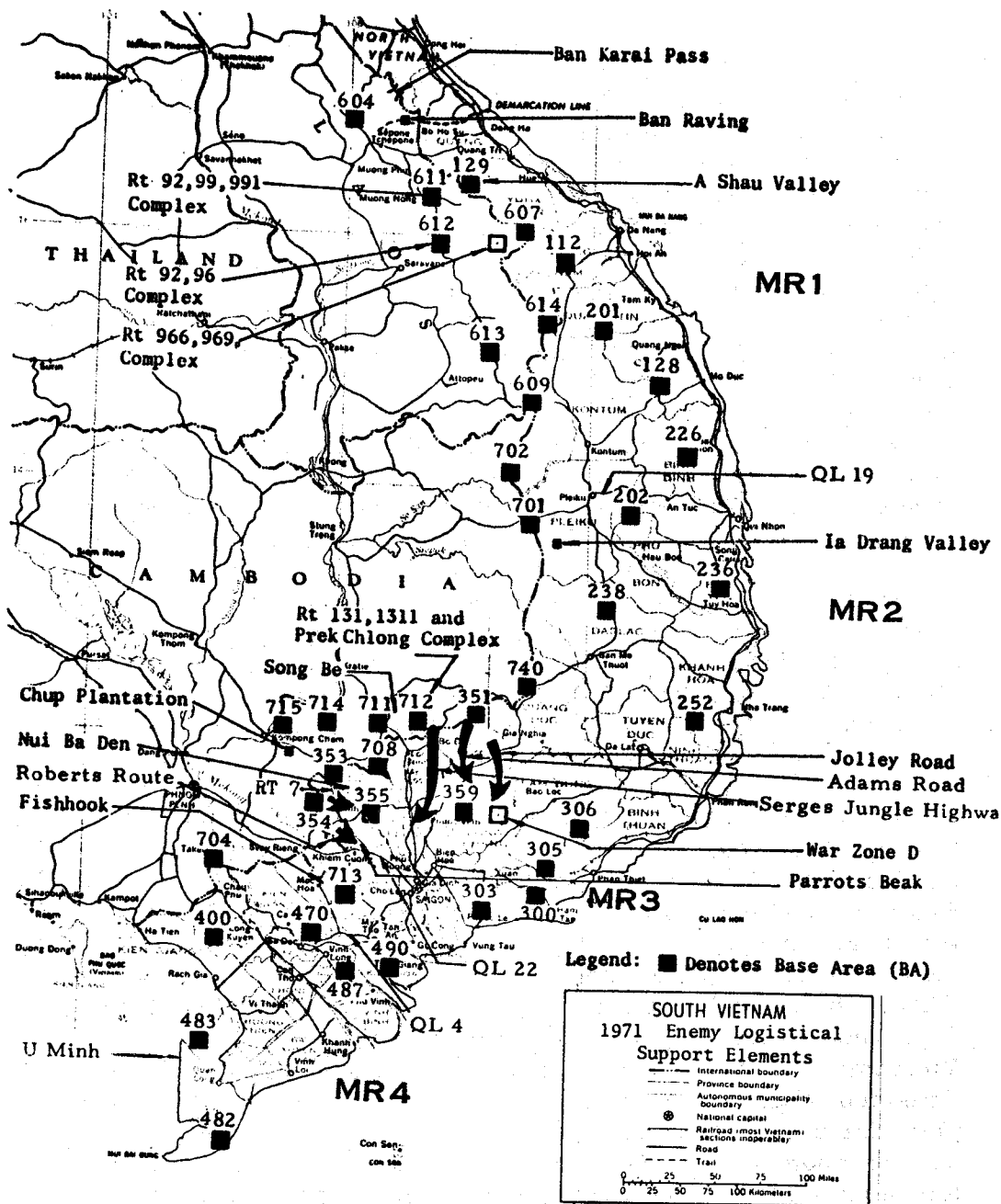
● The increased enemy air activity and U.S. aircraft losses in November and December also precipitated considerable re-evaluation within the Air Force of what had until recently been regarded as only a sporadic threat. Throughout the fall of 1971, Seventh Air Force had raised questions about air defense problems, and in early December a conference was held on the subject at Udorn in Thailand, followed by another at Seventh Air Force. As losses increased in mid-December, Headquarters USAF undertook an examination of what lay behind them. <sup>62</sup> As a result, a strong new emphasis was given to tightening up and improving air defense mission operations. This together with air defense dedicated crews and increased aircraft alerts, began to produce results in the early months of 1972. <sup>63</sup>

(U) Other Defense Department officials also acknowledged the seriousness of the new air threat from North Vietnam. On 8 November, Secretary of the Air Force Robert C. Seamans said that while in the entire war over North Vietnam the ratio of U.S. air superiority had been about 2-1/2 to 1, in the last months in the ratio had approached 1 to 1. <sup>64</sup> (This included enemy radar and missile forces as well as MIG-21s.) Secretary of Defense Laird, in justifying the massive U.S. strikes of Proud Deep Alpha to the press at a 27 December news conference, cited among other reasons--the fact that "in the month of December more U.S. planes of all types have been attacked by North Vietnam than in any month since I have been Secretary of Defense." <sup>65</sup> The U.S. command in Saigon, while maintaining silence on the Proud Deep Alpha strikes until they were ended, claimed the targets had been supply depots, AAA sites, and "certain airfields south of the 20th Parallel from which there has been increasing MIG aircraft activity in recent weeks. . . ." <sup>66</sup>

(U) Domestic reaction to our bombing of North Vietnam became intense in some quarters. Democratic election opponents called the bombing a desperate attempt to salvage the President's wrecked Vietnamization policy and 31 members of the House of Representatives telegraphed the President, labelling the raids

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Source: MACJ2

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"a reversion to the discredited bombing policy of the past." 67 Although some columnists had noted the increased MIG and SAM threats, the Administration, still pushing withdrawal, did not stress this factor. The President, in his 12 November press conference, simply emphasized once again the need to use air power to stem enemy infiltration and protect remaining U.S. troops. If infiltration increased substantially, he said, it would be necessary not merely to continue the air strikes, they would have to be stepped up. He was not going to let the enemy "pounce on [the remaining U.S. troops] by reason of our failure to use air power.."

(U) This was of course still the basic factor. The North Vietnamese campaign against U.S. air aimed precisely at countering the American air interdiction campaign to which the President had keyed all his hopes for success--in making North Vietnam give up the fight and negotiate, and in giving Vietnamization the time and opportunity to work. But North Vietnam had, in effect, accepted the President's air challenge. So it was not strange that widespread criticism and cries of "moral outrage" did not deter President Nixon from ordering the heavy air attacks of Proud Deep Alpha. In the face of Hanoi's new effort to thwart his objectives, he had no alternative.

(U) At stake was not just the continued effectiveness of the U.S. air interdiction campaign in its efforts to inhibit new enemy buildups. There were other far-reaching implications. The South Vietnamese had no aircraft to compete with the MIGs, and with U.S. air support leaving, and North Vietnam able to shoot the planes of the VNAF and RLAF out of the skies, the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese armed forces, with their great dependence on air support, would come into serious question. If Vietnamization were seen to fail, this would be a severe blow to President Nixon's prestige, especially in an election year. His plans for a new China policy and visit to Peking, as well as subsequent approaches to Moscow, might run into snags if the war took such a turn. The warning of "a highly placed military authority in Saigon" was not just an empty one: "Continued use of MIGs could put the entire war into a new perspective." 68 Nor did Neil Sheehan write in the New York Times without justification: "Much - perhaps Vietnamization, perhaps Mr. Nixon's political future - now rides with the American airmen in Southeast Asia." 69

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## III. VIETNAMIZATION

Despite the continuing military activity, and an unremitting air interdiction campaign, the year 1971 was primarily one of intense planning and preparation by the Administration to Vietnamize the war and withdraw U.S. forces by mid-1972. Since the all-important withdrawals depended so directly on Vietnamization, the stress was very heavily on assuring and accelerating the latter. On 6 January Secretary Laird announced that Vietnamization programs were ahead of schedule and that the American ground combat responsibility would come to an end in the course of the year.<sup>1</sup> In mid-February he reminded the Service Secretaries and the Chairman of the JCS, "I want to make sure there are no misunderstandings in DOD as to the direction we are moving in our long-standing efforts to improve and modernize the RVNAF. . . the object is to transfer progressively to the RVN greatly increased responsibility for all aspects of the war."<sup>2</sup>

Expansion and Acceleration

(TS) One of the usual first American recommendations for improving the South Vietnamese forces was to increase their size by adding men and equipment. But in the case of the Vietnamese Air Force, there was always a problem as to how much the improvement could be accelerated, because of the skilled manpower and training problems involved. At the end of 1970, MACV and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS) had recommended acceleration of the 1.1 million RVNAF manpower ceiling from FY 1973 to FY 1972. For the VNAF, this meant attaining a strength of 46,998 by the end of FY 72. In addition, there was to be an increase of over 5,000 by the end of FY 73 for a total of 52,171. The proposal did not call for activation of major VNAF units in this time frame, but provided recruiting and training for units scheduled for activation in FY 73.<sup>3</sup> CINCPAC approved these proposals and on 17 February 1971, forwarded them to JCS who approved them on 19 April,<sup>4</sup> as did Secretary Laird on 3 June.<sup>5</sup>



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(S) There was nevertheless the hope that acceleration could go further. On 12 February Secretary Laird directed a special inquiry to the JCS about the possibility of providing an additional 100 prop-driven, long-loiter aircraft to South Vietnam, to increase the air support capability of the VNAF.\*<sup>6</sup> JCS replied that the aircraft could be delivered, but the crucial factor was the VNAF's capability to integrate them into the current force and use them--pilots could not be trained nor the maintenance capability developed rapidly enough.<sup>7</sup> JCS did however repeat an earlier suggestion for immediate procurement of more T-28s for Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand, in order to enhance the overall allied posture while taking some of the pressure off South Vietnam's requirements.<sup>8</sup> Secretary Laird echoed JCS objections about adding 100 more VNAF aircraft in a memo to Henry Kissinger, asserting that any near-term changes to add different types of aircraft would result in diluting the experience level of the VNAF to the point where safety would be compromised.<sup>9</sup> He acted speedily on the substitute JCS proposal however, approving on 8 April 18 T-28s for Cambodia, 86 for Laos, and 60 for Thailand in FY 72.<sup>10</sup>

#### The President Asks Further Efforts

(S) On 26 March, the President expressed interest in a further expansion and improvement of the RVNAF at a meeting with Defense secretaries Laird and Packard and Admiral Moorer. \*\*

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\* In a related background paper, JCS noted this inquiry had originated with the President but that they did not know the basis for it.

\*\* This meeting took place right after some of the most troublesome developments of the Lam Son 719 campaign (see pp 17-18). Since the RVNAF performance in this Operation did not give much cause for optimism, it is not strange that the administration felt a new urgency to strengthen its hand.

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Henry Kissinger outlined the specifics of the President's wishes in a memo to Secretary Laird:

. . . the President has directed that you join with me and CJCS in conducting a detailed analysis of future plans for expanding and modernizing the armed forces of VN . . .

The President specifically requested, among other things, evaluation of illustrative levels of major items of equipment for Vietnamese air and navy units, with emphasis on helicopter troop and cargo lift, helicopter gunship and tactical air capabilities. <sup>11</sup>

~~(S)~~ The JCS replied on 23 April that neither the manpower nor the economic base in RVN could support a military force above 1.1 million men. Any drastic force structure change or addition of unprogrammed new and sophisticated equipment could impede the success of their current programs. <sup>12</sup> The field commanders also stated that it did not appear possible at this time either to advance VNAF tactical air activations further or to increase the force level beyond 50 squadrons. There was no way to expedite training that could improve VNAF combat capabilities. The only feasible augmentation was to program helicopter squadrons four to five months early, but this had to be carefully weighed in view of the maintenance and other requirements it entailed. <sup>13</sup> The Secretary of the Air Force had reported earlier that the VNAF now had 36 squadrons of the projected 50, 14 of them activated within the past year -- five on an accelerated basis, aided by USAF maintenance augmentation. He said he had discussed a further speedup personally with General Lucius D. Clay, Jr., of Seventh Air Force, who felt the program had been accelerated to about the maximum feasible limit. <sup>14</sup>

~~(S)~~ The President meanwhile showed he was watching, and counting on, improvements within the VNAF. On 16 April, speaking of an upcoming withdrawal announcement and what this depended on, he said that he would among other things "analyze the training of the South Vietnamese forces and particularly their air force at that time." <sup>15</sup> Just the day before, Dr. Kissinger had directed that a series of 12 studies be undertaken, "in order

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to carry out the President's instructions to make a complete assessment of the situation in South Vietnam through 1972.<sup>16</sup> One of the studies called for a detailed examination of possible improvements in the RVNAF, including increased hardware and helicopters and additional air interdiction options. After reviewing the studies, the Senior Review Group (SRG) agreed that the threat facing the RVNAF at probable U. S. force levels in 1972 was serious and that certain measures should be taken now "on an urgent basis" to further strengthen the South Vietnamese.<sup>17</sup> Their forces had two main tasks: stopping an enemy main force threat, and countering his infiltration of men and supplies. For the South Vietnamese Air Force, this meant providing the ground forces with mobility and airlift, and developing interdiction capabilities. Due to South Vietnam's lack of roads and other transportation facilities, and to the U. S. ground tactics its forces had been trained in, the RVNAF's dependence on air support was very high. With many of the U. S. forces supplying mobility, airlift and firepower now being withdrawn, it was very necessary for the VNAF to acquire these capabilities as quickly as possible.

#### Measures to Improve Mobility, Firepower and Airlift

(C) Under President Nixon's prodding, as noted above, the VNAF acquired four helicopter squadrons ahead of schedule, i. e., by FY 72 instead of FY 73, with two of them even activated during 1971.<sup>18</sup> This added up to 16 helicopter squadrons as of 31 December 1971, and to a force of 500 UH-1H and 32 CH-47 helicopters. As pointed out by Secretary Packard, this gave South Vietnam a "tactical mobility significantly exceeding that of the NVA/VC force."<sup>19</sup> In addition, the U. S. withdrawal plans provided for retaining maximum helicopter support as late as possible in the cycle. Based at major U. S. army airfields, helicopter units were to operate from forward bases to provide the required support.<sup>20</sup>

(C) Fighter squadrons did not expand in 1971, primarily because of a shortage of combat-ready crews. The high priority accorded helicopter pilot training in both 1970 and 1971 had

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VNAF Aircraft as of 31 December 1971

<u>Aircraft</u>	<u>On hand 31 Dec 70</u>	<u>On hand 31 Dec 71</u>	<u>Net Gain</u>	<u>Authorized 31 Dec 71</u>	<u>CRIMP Authorization</u>
UH-1	262	489	227	469	500
CH-47	16	20	4	16	32
A-1	61	70	9	60	96
A-37	100	108	8	90	144
F/RF-5	26	23	-3	24	26
O-1	105	268	163	155	200
C-119	16	19	3	16	16
C-123	0	48	48	48	48
AC-119	0	24	24	18	18

Source: CINCPAC Command History 1971 (TS) p 638.

Comparisons of VNAF Force Readiness as of 31 December Each Year

	<u>1968</u>	<u>1969</u>	<u>1970</u>	<u>1971</u>
Total pilots available	861	1,065	1,645	2,571
Nr aircraft on hand (all types)	361	451	746	1,222
Nr combat aircrews ready	NA	NA	558	984

Source: USMACV Command Hist 1971

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absorbed most available pilot trainees.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the existing fighter force gained experience and matured in flying hour management, as the percentage of VNAF attack sorties increased in 1971. At the end of the year, the VNAF flew over 63% of the in-country combat sorties and 39% of those in Cambodia. For the year as a whole, sorties had increased by 69.8%<sup>22</sup> over calendar year 1970, and hours flown by 56% (163,000 flying hours were logged in the fourth quarter of the year).<sup>23</sup> In September the USAF transferred an AC-119G Shadow gunship squadron to the VNAF and this gave them a second gunship squadron.<sup>24</sup> With the acquisition of AC-119s instead of the AC-47s originally planned, a shorter training time became possible, since the C-119G was already in the VNAF inventory.<sup>25</sup>

( ) To support airlift requirements, transport squadrons grew from two in 1970 to five in 1971. Three squadrons of C-123s (48 aircraft) were introduced into the VNAF inventory, and all were operational by December 1971. Three C-119s were added to the 16 on hand at the beginning of the year. The VNAF share of the total RVNAF airlift workload rose to 80% during the course of the year, and in the passenger workload to nearly 60%.<sup>26</sup>

#### Support Functions and Training

( ) A greatly accelerated turnover of support functions to the VNAF--base defense, civil engineering, communications and logistics--also took place during 1971. By the end of the year, the VNAF owned and was operating the Tactical Air Navigation (TACAN) facilities at Binh Thuy, Ban Me Thuot, Bien Hoa, Nha Trang, Pleiku, Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Cat. The Direct Air Support Centers (DASC) at Pleiku, Bien Hoa, and Da Nang passed to VNAF control by November. On 5 November, Tan Son Nhut became a VNAF-owned, operated and, maintained facility, and in December, Phu Cat became the eighth major air base facility to be turned over to the VNAF.<sup>27</sup>

( ) The assumption of all these support functions made great demands on the VNAF training system. Aggressive programs at all in-country training facilities and on-the-job training were the main means for coping with the problem. The trend toward

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achieving independence from training programs in the United States intensified as time became increasingly short for taking over responsibility from U. S. forces. Even pilot training in the United States tapered off. The USAF 14th Special Operations Wing conducted in-country training for VNAF C-123 and AC-119 combat crews as well as C-7 training. These graduates in turn trained as instructors and assisted in training succeeding VNAF students.<sup>28</sup>

● In sum, the VNAF did manage to accelerate their development as the Administration desired, by activating squadrons before the scheduled times, impossible as this at first seemed. As Brigadier General Kendall S. Young, a member of the Air Force Advisory Group in Vietnam at the time, said "We figured the program was so tight, a sneeze would blow it apart."<sup>29</sup> But the tight schedules were exceeded in almost every category, and the VNAF achieved a 40% increase in the number of activated squadrons and a corresponding increase in their share of the air war in SEA. Still, serious gaps remained, if they were to take over responsibility for the air role from U. S. forces. The two major ones were in air defense and interdiction. Both tacitly involved the powerful, sophisticated aircraft which the United States had been using to perform these missions and which the VNAF were denied. This basic factor was built-in dilemma in trying to provide South Vietnam with a capability to take over responsibility in the air.

#### Vietnamization of Air Defense

(U) If U. S. air power was to be reduced to any great degree, the question of who would assume the air defense of Southeast Asia had to be addressed. In light of North Vietnamese Air Force aggressiveness later in 1971, this problem was to take on special significance.

#### The USAF Air Defense Paper

● Already at the beginning of the year, the Air Staff was working on a "SEA Air Defense Paper." On 23 February, Lt Gen Russell E. Dougherty, Deputy Chief of Staff, Plans and Operations, sent the Chief of Staff a status report on it saying the paper not

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only discussed air defense problems and force options to meet various threat levels, but also addressed some policy issues that would have to be resolved. He acknowledged the many unknowns and uncertainties in the matter, but thought the paper would be "a useful starting point, and our objective is to get us started on the road to having a better view of what must be done."<sup>30</sup> About this same time, Admiral Moorer asked the Joint Staff for a thorough re-evaluation of the RVNAF I&M program and requested preparation of a separate appendix evaluating the air defense posture of SVN "to include command and control and early warning requirements after the U. S. troop withdrawals have been completed." <sup>31</sup>

On 2 April the Chief of Staff forwarded to JCS the completed Air Force study (64 pages). One of its major conclusions was that current South Vietnamese and Thai air defense systems were incapable of successfully defending northern RVN, eastern Thailand, northern Cambodia, and Laos against an all-out air attack by North Vietnam, and could not be maintained without U. S. logistical support for the foreseeable future. Some type of U. S. presence and/or commitment was required as a deterrent; and an improved system was necessary to support the planned RVN interdiction program and counter North Vietnam's air support of their ground force operations. Effectiveness could be improved by installing additional radars and improving existing ones; increasing the number of interceptors to permit defense-in-depth, dedicating a specific number of aircraft to the mission, and providing additional aircraft shelters and ground-to-air weapons to reduce vulnerability in high threat areas. Regardless of whether additional resources could be made available, the survivability of South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand depended on their cooperation under a mutual security arrangement. The study recommended that the United States actively sponsor such a security arrangement, and offered ten specific operational proposals in line with its conclusions. <sup>32</sup> The JCS forwarded this study to CINCPAC on 30 April. <sup>33</sup>

#### JCS and Field Views on SEA Air Defense

The field commanders, responding in mid-April to a different query, had said accelerated delivery of the planned

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F-5E air defense aircraft would improve the VNAF air defense posture, but if present delivery dates remained in effect, either the U.S. air defense capability would have to remain in SEA or the United States would have to accept the risk that North Vietnam could launch an air assault.<sup>34</sup> A JCS "RVN Assessment" study in mid-May maintained that U.S. air defense missions would still be necessary in FY 72 because of the VNAF's stage of development.<sup>35</sup> CINCPAC's comments on the USAF air defense study later that month said some order of priority ought to be established, for example, provision of air defense interceptor aircraft to Thailand should not be at the expense of counter-insurgency aircraft. CINCPAC also stressed the heavy additional financial burden involved in a common air defense system as well as the unlikelihood of getting any mutual agreement among the concerned.<sup>36</sup>

The JCS concurred with the Air Force study and forwarded it to Secretary Laird on 28 June, almost exactly as written. JCS doubted that a regional security system could be established without a U.S. military presence of short or direct enemy threat, but nevertheless recommended that negotiations be undertaken, in conjunction with the State Department and Country Teams. They conceded that "without adequate air defense, and RVNAF air interdiction program in Laos or northeastern Cambodia could be rendered impractical by the intercept capability of North Vietnam over these areas." They also cited the matter of the capability of these countries to maintain and operate complex air and ground equipment, despite U.S. efforts to provide a relatively unsophisticated system. And finally, JCS recommended that as long as U.S. aircraft supported the RVN effort, U.S. air defense aircraft should be committed to SEA and defense operating teams retained at key radar sites as determined by CINCPAC.<sup>37</sup>

#### Secretary Laird's View

Secretary Laird told JCS on 20 July that he was in general agreement with their conclusions, and in particular that "undue sophistication should be avoided, and additional air defense



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improvements kept in perspective of overall requirements." He thought bilateral relationships between South Vietnam and Thailand should be improved as a way to a more effective air defense effort, but saw no over-riding need for, or prospect of, multilateral air defense agreements at this time. He said that the U.S. air defense capability should be retained to provide protection for U.S. forces. Regional protection derived therefrom was incidental to, rather than the reason for, such a U.S. capability. He agreed that air defense would be improved by augmenting present equipment, but recommended taking advantage of resources already available, such as the 2,600 50 caliber machine guns currently authorized. Likewise, he felt that local warning and passive defense measures, if effectively planned and executed, could probably do more to counter the limited air threat than introduction of expensive and complex systems beyond each country's capability to maintain and operate.<sup>38</sup> In other words, as of 20 July, Secretary Laird did not appear overly concerned about an air threat from North Vietnam.

#### Second Thoughts on SEA Air Defense

( ) In the Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan forwarded to Secretary Laird on 23 August, the JCS noted that they had reviewed, but rejected, the possibility of increasing the VNAF air defense interceptor force. They had not considered this a feasible or realistic option because of South Vietnam's resource austerity and the relatively low priority accorded to VNAF force independently capable of countering a future MIG threat.<sup>39</sup> In December, after the step-up in MIG activity, the Chiefs became more concerned about an air defense capability for South Vietnam. On 10 December, replying to Secretary Laird's urgent request for action on providing STOL aircraft for a VNAF interdiction capability, they deferred approval (see below p 65). But they said they were considering other options, including accelerated production of F-5E aircraft, which not only had a capability for interdiction in a high threat environment, but would provide increased air defense capability. They acknowledged that the current increase in MIG activity and construction of MIG-capable airfields in southern North Vietnam posed an increased threat to South Vietnam.

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And since air interdiction was dependent on air superiority, South Vietnam's capability to perform the air defense mission would become increasingly important in the absence of U. S. forces.<sup>40</sup> On 30 December 1971, Secretary Laird approved the FY 73 procurement of the remaining 57 VNAF F-5E aircraft which had been programmed as an FY 1973 buy for 29 aircraft and a FY 1974 buy of 28 aircraft. <sup>41</sup>

(C) In sum, up until the latter part of 1971, the deficiency in South Vietnam's air defense posture had been acknowledged, but only the U. S. Air Force had suggested specific measures to improve it. As North Vietnamese air aggressiveness intensified in the last months of 1971 however, this gap in VNAF capabilities came sharply into focus. The other major gap noted above, South Vietnam's lack of interdiction capabilities, had by contrast been a major preoccupation of all echelons throughout the year. The scope and intensity of these efforts were such that they merit a separate discussion, which immediately follows.

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## IV. - VIETNAMIZATION OF INTERDICTION

(U) In all past Vietnamization efforts, the question of turning over to South Vietnam responsibility for interdiction had been ignored or sidestepped. There had never been any plan to give South Vietnam the sophisticated aircraft the U.S. used in this mission, and it was more or less assumed that the U.S. would continue to perform it.

Secretary Laird: Vietnamization Includes Interdiction

On 19 February 1971 Secretary Laird jolted these assumptions about interdiction when he firmly told the Service Secretaries and the Chairman of the JCS that transferring responsibility for all aspects of the war to South Vietnam included interdiction. He said:

... We must not let semantic difficulties obscure the fact that an interdiction capability can be Vietnamized. In the broadest sense, optimum interdiction of enemy supplies would occur if the North Vietnamese and their suppliers were to bear the full expense and backbreaking burden of moving materials to locations in or around SVN only to have those supplies fall into the hands of, and be useable by, the South Vietnamese. Similarly, optimum interdiction of enemy troop movements would take place only after the enemy had invested considerable time and effort in moving those men southward. . . My point is . . . that acceptably effective interdiction can occur very near or even at destination points. Possible forms of interdiction would include disruption by ground and naval forces, capture of caches located under stimulus of financial incentives, political pressures and, of course, air interdiction.

In other words, interdiction was not just a matter of bombing outside the country as the U.S. had been doing--especially along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos--and as South Vietnam did not have the capability to do. Secretary Laird was seeking a way for South Vietnam to take over the interdiction function

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and therefore he was tailoring the mission to their capabilities. He requested JCS's assessment of South Vietnam's capability, both now and after completion of the current I&M program, to interdict North Vietnam's infiltration. He also said he "would be interested" in recommendations for improving South Vietnam's overall interdiction capabilities. <sup>1</sup>

#### USAF and JCS Reactions

(S) The Secretary of the Air Force replied on 16 April, saying that the Air Force was continually seeking to provide an improved VNAF interdiction capability. He reaffirmed an earlier suggestion for replacing the AC-47 with the AC-119K as the preferred gunship for the VNAF, because there would be less impact on VNAF manpower, training, maintenance, and logistics requirements, and no major force structure change required. As for Secretary Laird's more general Vietnamization objectives, he made three observations. The Air Force agreed that we could not give the VNAF all the capabilities U. S. forces now had in SEA; in order to have a significant interdiction capability in the high threat area of southern Laos, the VNAF would require more modern and sophisticated aircraft; the current VNAF I&M program had already been accelerated to about the maximum feasible extent. <sup>2</sup>

(S) Secretary Laird had in the interim received from Dr. Kissinger the President's request for additional strengthening of South Vietnamese forces. (see p. 46).<sup>3</sup> In forwarding to JCS this new request, he reaffirmed his 19 February requirements on Vietnamizing interdiction, adding that he hoped this would include all aspects of interdiction, e. g., air, land, sea and even political approaches which might provide the goals sought by interdiction.<sup>4</sup> A few days later Secretary Laird asked JCS to reassess U. S. military strategy in SEA. As one specific topic, he asked them to consider "alternate ways to interdict enemy materiel infiltration that RVN might adopt when the U.S. air interdiction effort is reduced or eliminated." <sup>5</sup>

(S) On 19 April the JCS replied to both of these memos. They said the current CRIMP had not been designed to provide the

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RVNAF with an out-of-country air interdiction capability, to which the U.S. was devoting some two-thirds of its SEA tactical air operations. The CRIMP was merely designed to provide SVN by mid-1973 with a capability to cope with a combined VC/NVN threat and, to achieve this, certain U.S. out-of-country and offshore tactical support would be required beyond mid-1973. While most missions would be transferred to the South Vietnamese as U.S. forces redeployed, the United States would retain and continue to provide such missions as out-of-country interdictions, air defense, and B-52 strikes. If the VNAF had to assume the responsibility of interdicting enemy lines of communication as U.S. air operations in SEA declined, it would have to be modernized with more sophisticated and less vulnerable aircraft--unless the enemy AAA threat along these LOCs decreased significantly. The VNAF's capability to conduct limited air interdiction operations outside the borders of SVN against low threat areas could be improved by substituting aircraft with greater capabilities for those currently programmed, for example, AC-119Ks for AC-47s. The helicopter assets planned for FY 73 would give the RVNAF a modest capability to conduct air mobile assault operations to interdict enemy base areas and LOCs. The RVNAF's special cross-border capability, oriented primarily to intelligence collection, also represented a limited interdiction capability in the form of small-scale raids and ambushes. As for Secretary Laird's suggestion that effective interdiction could occur near destination points, the JCS flatly disagreed. They argued that interdiction of vulnerable choke points in the infiltration system was more productive, although they agreed that strikes against other destination points should parallel the primary effort. <sup>6</sup>

#### A DOD View

(TS) A quite different view appeared in one of the reassessment studies requested by Kissinger in April, a Department of Defense evaluation of the RVNAF I&M program which Secretary Laird forwarded to the President on 18 May. The study said in part:

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Vietnamese forces need some reasonable capability to impede the flow of men and material from North Vietnam to forces in the south. We should not expect the RVNAF to be able to stop the flow--indeed, the large and costly U. S. effort was unable to do this or even to reduce the amounts of supplies reaching the south below the basic needs of the VC/NVA. But they should be able to exact some price and complicate the enemy's logistical efforts. . . . Though the aerial bombardment in the Lao panhandle has been a principal feature of the U. S. interdiction effort, similar capabilities in magnitude and sophistication cannot be duplicated even from the combined resources of all forces in SEA, including Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Our approach, therefore, has been to analyze the entire interdiction system and to maximize those capabilities which are compatible with indigenous potential. . . . with emphasis on those relatively inexpensive ground and air systems and tactics which can be sustained by SVN. Such systems and techniques exist but need continued improvement and added impetus . . . .

The study said the VNAF would have a limited air interdiction capability, composed of 258 A-1, A-37, and F-5 fighters by FY 73, and two gunship squadrons. Other studies were continuing on alternate weapons systems of less sophistication and cost like a "mini gunship" force. Since U.S. air interdiction must eventually phase out however, the South Vietnamese would have to have a capability to interdict men and materiel further down the pipeline where targets became more numerous and dispersed. A variety of techniques was under consideration for expediting reaction to intelligence on infiltration, and improving cross-border reconnaissance operations. The study also emphasized that the most effective means of interdiction was to shut off the flow at the source. The loss of Sihanoukville and the Cambodian sanctuaries through political developments was credited with doing more to degrade enemy capabilities in southern RVN than the bombing campaign ever could have. It recommended that continued efforts be made along such lines, particularly in trying to diminish Hanoi's support by Moscow and Peking.

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The interdiction of men and materiel was not exclusively a function of the tonnage of bombs dropped, and as U. S. involvement continued to wind down, other interdiction methods had to be used to help keep the threat within South Vietnam at manageable proportions. <sup>7</sup>

#### Laird and Packard Intensify Vietnamization Efforts

(S) While these studies and replies to previous directives filtered back up to the Secretary of Defense, the latter prepared two new directives which left no room for doubt about the intention to Vietnamize interdiction. The first was a 10 May memo for the Service Secretaries and the Director of the Defense Special Projects Group (DSPG), signed by Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard.<sup>8</sup> The second, a week later, was addressed to the Chairman of the JCS and signed by Secretary Laird.<sup>9</sup> Both memos contained the sentence:

It is apparent the highly sophisticated U. S. aerial bombardment capability cannot be duplicated in VNAF just as it is apparent that the U. S. effort cannot be continued indefinitely.

Both went on to say that more had to be done to improve indigenous capabilities with less sophisticated systems. As Secretary Laird put it in his memo:

I have concluded therefore that greater emphasis must be placed on the imaginative combination of tactics, techniques and the technology to improve RVNAF interdiction capabilities at a level of sophistication below B-52s and F-4s.

In his memo, Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard listed five projects he wanted assessed. First, he wanted the Secretary of the Air Force, in conjunction with others, to investigate the desirability of adding the CBU-55\* weapon to the VNAF

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\* Cluster Bomb Unit. A Fuel Air Explosive (FAE) munition containing three 130-lb modules filled with 70 lbs of ethylene oxide.

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inventory because of its effectiveness against sheltered and dug-in enemy personnel or against emplaced enemy mines. Secondly, he asked the Secretary of the Air Force to make a detailed investigation of the concept of providing the VNAF with a "mini-gunship" fleet to replace the U. S. AC-119, AC-130 and B-57G family of aircraft used in Commando Hunt operations. Third, he also asked the Secretary of the Air Force to investigate improved equipment to permit expanded use of small airborne raiding parties against segments, both personnel and materiel, of the Laotian infiltration system. The fourth request asked the Director of DSPG, with others, to evaluate the feasibility of developing a "strategic read-out system" for the RVNAF to measure infiltration input. The fifth project asked the Secretary of the Army and the Director of DSPG to appraise the RVNAF need for additional border surveillance equipment. In each of these five studies, Secretary Packard "earnestly requested" the Service Secretaries to recognize the need for developing simple, straightforward solutions, "not necessarily consistent with normal American military practice."

(S) Secretary Laird's memo to the Chairman of the JCS endorsed the five studies and said their results would be referred to JCS for comment. Then he asked for JCS views on a suggested program for RVNAF targeting of the enemy personnel infiltration system, by either ground or air operations and using currently planned force levels. He further asked them to recommend changes in the Rules of Engagement that might facilitate such targeting, and to consider the desirability of a dedicated force to exploit intelligence on the infiltration system. He concluded by saying greater imagination and ingenuity was essential in developing Vietnamese solutions to the interdiction program. 10

#### The Air Force Replies

(S) The Secretary of the Air Force replied to Deputy Secretary Packard on 10 June, forwarding the three studies the latter had requested. The Secretary described all three as including "ongoing Air Force considerations to improve VNAF



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interdiction capabilities." He said he expected to discuss these projects with field commanders during his forthcoming trip to SEA, and to provide further comments and recommendations upon his return. The first study identified programs and actions underway for providing the VNAF with the CBU-55 weapon. This weapon would significantly increase the kill capability of VNAF fixed-wing and helicopter units against concealed forces and devices, and could be effective against AAA sites if the aircraft could penetrate such defenses to deliver it. The second study discussed special communications and navigation equipment, supplemented by sensors, to support airborne raiding parties engaged in reconnaissance, ambush, and exploitation operations to harass and disrupt enemy infiltration routes.

(S) The third study, on the mini-gunship, described a method for increasing RVNAF self-sufficiency in firepower and mobility through use of a large number of armed light STOL aircraft. Prepared by the Air Staff's Assistant for Vietnamization, Maj Gen Leslie W. Bray, Jr., it re-oriented interdiction efforts from southern Laos to the contiguous border areas of South Vietnam and Cambodia and aimed at developing an interdiction capability in conjunction with small highly mobile ground teams and use of unsophisticated sensors.\* The study (named "Credible Crusade") gave details on all the planning aspects and requirements for the mini-gunship program. The generally positive approach of this study suffered somewhat from the inclusion of an Intelligence Annex which painted a very dark picture of prospects for a VNAF interdiction capability.\*\*

#### JCS Replies

(S) On the same date, 10 June, the JCS answered Secretary Laird's 12 April request for a reassessment of SEA military strategy, including alternate South Vietnamese interdiction

\* The basic concept for such a VNAF interdiction role was discussed by the Deputy Director of Defense Research and Engineering (DDR&E) Leonard Sullivan Jr., in a 14 April memo to Gen. Bray on proposed RVNAF interdiction alternatives.

\*\* See Appendix 1 for a full account of efforts to develop the mini-gunship program.

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options after the United States air interdiction effort was reduced or eliminated. They offered three strategy options, which "differed primarily in the level and scope of the interdiction envisioned," and which stipulated that continued effective air interdiction by U.S. forces was essential under any of the three.<sup>12</sup> Five days later, the JCS answered Secretary Laird's memo which had enjoined more imagination in developing Vietnamese interdiction solutions. They approved putting more emphasis on targeting the personnel infiltration system; this could be done by integrating sensor reports and reconnaissance sightings, with timely processing. They recommended significant changes in the Rules of Engagement, i.e., relaxation of restrictions, to improve cross-border operations. They did not approve setting up a RVNAF force dedicated solely to infiltration interdiction, nor creating a single command to handle such activities, but recommended a strong, centralized planning element under the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff (JGS). The JCS also attached an important caveat: all these improvements were feasible, "given JGS willingness to commit forces of sufficient magnitude against infiltration targets." In addition, a 9-page appendix (on which JCS said they had based their conclusions, gave a formidable picture of what the South Vietnamese would be up against. The enemy, the appendix claimed, knew the importance of his line of communication in the Lao panhandle and had stationed some 60-80,000 men there. Within the past year he had increased the number of personnel manning it by half and deployed 20 SAMs and some AAA battalions to secure it. Some twenty tactical battalions with an unknown number of tanks protected the line in southern Laos, and 254 MIGs could operate over the entire panhandle from secure bases in North Vietnam.

(S) There had been a drastic reduction of ground intelligence collection along the trail since U.S. cross-border operations into Cambodia and Laos had terminated. The current 117 U.S. reconnaissance teams were scheduled to reduce to 30 by FY 73, and if SVN continued these operations on its own, the risks would increase and the results decrease. There was no existing U.S. intelligence system that could be provided to the RVNAF that would reliably locate infiltrating personnel. In all areas, the RVNAF would be working with a much smaller

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force structure than the current combined force. As of mid-June the JCS was clearly not optimistic on the prospects of Vietnamizing interdiction. 13

(■) Secretary Laird replied that he believed we had begun to identify some realistic RVNAF interdiction capabilities consistent with eventual withdrawal of U. S. forces from SEA. " He reiterated that the trend of U. S. redeployments and air activity would continue as at present or accelerate. He agreed to consider any necessary ROE changes except those removing the restrictions on use of U. S. personnel outside RVN and on use of U. S. air in North Vietnam. He asked JCS to submit a combined interdiction campaign plan for FY 72, which would reflect an increasing RVNAF participation in and responsibility for the interdiction effort. The plan should address border surveillance, a primitive "strategic read-out system", coordinating Allied air and ground raids against enemy infiltration systems, in lower threat areas of Laos, integrating a refined U. S. Commando Hunt effort, a reward/incentive program for uncovering enemy materiel caches, and strengthening South Vietnamese naval interdiction efforts. In addition, Secretary Laird asked the Air Force to design a combat test of selected equipment and concepts which might allow the RVNAF to conduct their own counter-infiltration operations in the future. This was to include "all aspects of a future RVNAF substitute campaign, including intelligence collection, strategic read-out, air interdiction, air support, infiltration/exfiltration of raiding parties, and possible improvements for their border surveillance system." He ended his directions, saying:

I need not remind you the fate of our national Vietnamization policy rests in part on evolution of a credible RVNAF interdiction capability at the earliest possible time. If suggestions proposed and studied by the services do not represent realistic and useful operational solutions, I believe it incumbent on JCS to evolve acceptable alternatives. It should be made clear to the Joint General Staff that the interdiction campaign will eventually become their total responsibility. Our process of withdrawal and disengagement is irreversible--including our own expensive and sophisticated air interdiction campaign over Laos. 14

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(S) On 23 August, JCS replied to both the above memo and to Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard's 10 May memo. There was no doubt about their continuing pessimism on Vietnamizing interdiction. They had reviewed the studies as requested by Secretary Laird and agreed that "some possible improvements have been identified which might be made in the RVNAF interdiction capability." Actually, they approved wholeheartedly of only one, the proposal to give the VNAF CBU-55s. They also approved the suggestion to give the RVNAF palletized airborne relay and relay terminal equipment to improve border surveillance, but noted this was already programmed for late 1971. The proposal for a Strategic Read-out System was operationally feasible but unrealistic because it would require expansion in aircrews, maintenance, and logistic support. The proposed use of unattended ground sensors in a non-real time mode was not likely to produce desired results because of target perishability (the Igloo White system had never successfully exploited the use of sensors to any significant advantage other than to put the sensors in standby status). JCS said the RVNAF's capability to implement such a proposal "does not exist" and its initial cost would be a million dollars. But they recommended that a limited strategic read-out system concept be included in the Credible Chase combat evaluation. The Credible Chase program, to test the "mini-gunship" concept, likewise received only lukewarm endorsement--implementing it would require as many as a thousand additional pilots as well as significant increases in ground support personnel. Further, serious problems would arise from the number of aircraft involved and the manner of their employment. The cost would total about \$1.7 billion for the first three years. Nevertheless, a combat evaluation should be conducted as scheduled to test the program's feasibility. Summarizing, JCS acknowledged the requirement to Vietnamize the interdiction effort to the maximum extent possible, but they felt that, regardless of the individual merits of the equipment and techniques discussed, these had to be integrated into interdiction plans on the basis of feasibility and practicality, fully considering available funds, skills, allocation of resources and desired results.<sup>15</sup>

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### The Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan

( ) On the same date, 23 August, JCS also forwarded the Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan requested by Secretary Laird. It was 46 pages long and "encompassed land, sea, riverine and air operations and covered the entire spectrum of infiltration targets." The plan noted that detailed planning was being accomplished by U. S. field commanders in close coordination with the RVNAF and Free World allies. But because of the short time remaining before onset of the 71-72 dry season, only a minor increase in RVNAF participation in this year's program was foreseen. The U. S. air operations campaign, Commando Hunt VII, would constitute the largest single element of the Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan for 1972 and RVNAF participation would be limited by resources and competing priorities for air assets. As the CRIMP progressed and the U. S. redeployed its forces, the VNAF would assume greater responsibility for tactical air, reconnaissance, forward air control (FAC) and gunship missions. But it was not feasible to effect a complete turnover of these missions to RVNAF during the forthcoming dry season. VNAF sorties would be applied within the limits of their resources against interdiction targets in Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam and the VNAF would participate in testing the mini-gunship concept in an interdiction role during the coming dry season. The VNAF would also be encouraged to participate in Commando Hunt VII to the best of its ability, but it had not been trained or equipped to conduct air operations in high threat areas and its improvement program had been based on the assumption that U. S. air interdiction in Laos would continue. Inasmuch as this might no longer be a valid assumption, the VNAF should begin to develop its own capability to impede the flow of enemy men and materiel. For example, certification of their A-1 and A-37 aircraft to deliver CBU-55s was nearing completion and their A-37s were to be modified with 20 mm cannon. Among the constraints hampering full exploitation of VNAF air interdiction potential in the FY 72 campaign were: limited combat radius of their fighter aircraft; probable reallocation of VNAF resources to support ground operations in Military Region I; and limited capability of VNAF fighter pilots to conduct tactical air night strikes.<sup>16</sup>

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Secretary Laird Decrees an Interdiction  
Capability by Fall 1972

(S) Secretary Laird replied on 8 October that he was pleased RVNAF interdiction capabilities had grown, but added that "that momentum must be accelerated in every way possible." For example, he did not want improvements in RVNAF interdiction capabilities tied up in lengthy study and test cycles: "capabilities in this critical functional area must be maximized as soon as possible."

He went on:

I expect every advantage will be taken of past experience to accelerate all programs and that there will be a conscious effort not to underestimate RVNAF ability to operate and maintain limited amounts of additional equipments pertinent to conduct of their defense.

Though it has been frequently recognized that the U. S. interdiction capability cannot be duplicated in the RVNAF, it is less generally reflected in our plans and programs that U. S. interdiction cannot continue indefinitely. It is imperative to accelerate the time when we can consider the RVNAF prepared to "go it alone" if they must, regardless of current planning assumptions for the extent and duration of U. S. air activity in SEA. Therefore, I am establishing capability by fall 1972 which could, if necessary, be self-sustaining with no more than limited U. S. advisory effort.

He directed that the RVNAF was to assume responsibility for interdiction planning and operations for the 1972-73 Laotian dry season, with any future U. S. Commando Hunt operations integrated into the RVNAF plans as an add-on. Materiel assistance was to be accelerated and procedures designed to give all additional feasible capabilities to the RVNAF during the 1971-72 Laotian dry season. Planners were to assume that after that, the United States would not be able to provide those special capabilities that were non-existent or inadequate in indigenous forces, and were to design substitutes or alternatives accordingly. To further

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RVNAF air interdiction involvement in FY 72, he directed the planners to establish an objective for a VNAF contribution to Commando Hunt VII in the low threat areas of southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia and to make this an integral part of the Commando Hunt VII plan. They should immediately undertake improvements in VNAF basing for interdiction purposes, for example, additional VNAF aircraft might have to be based at Pleiku. They should also submit a plan for prompt provision to the VNAF of CBU-55s, as well as any other effective air munitions not currently in the I & M program. Reliance on U. S. P-3s in naval interdiction operations was a weakness, and he wanted a report on the extent of VNAF participation in coastal surveillance. Future I & M programming should consider changing the I & M program to: provide the VNAF with a limited maritime air patrol capability by giving them additional radar-equipped C-119s, C-47s or the equivalent; incorporate mini-gunships into the FY 72-73 I & M program, if tests were successful; provide an expanded sensor/radar capability for all ground forces and a sensor delivery/read-out capability to the VNAF; provide AC-119Gs, modify A-37s, and recommend any other significant change affecting RVNAF interdiction capability. He wanted by 15 February 1972 an estimate of the high cost and long lead-time I & M changes that might be required to provide this major SVN functional capability on an urgent basis.<sup>17</sup> Secretary Laird concluded by reiterating that every effort had to be made to involve the RVNAF "to the extreme limits of their capability in all facets of planning, coordination, execution, and evaluation of the [interdiction] campaign."

#### Mr. Sullivan's Trip Report

(TS) As a follow-up, Secretary Laird sent Mr. Leonard Sullivan, Deputy Director, Defense Research and Engineering, to Southeast Asia to explore possible avenues for Vietnamizing the U. S. air interdiction campaign. At a meeting with the combined Interdiction Coordination Committee (CICC), the latter emphasized that Secretary Laird anticipated an increase in the

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tempo of withdrawal of the U. S. air interdiction effort in Laos. The United States was still spending \$2 billion a year on this, and the question had to be asked as to what would happen if it stopped. He stressed the need to step up planning for Vietnamization of the air interdiction effort, with emphasis on rapid identification of possible major changes in the existing CRIMP.

(S) Mr. Sullivan's trip report was not optimistic. South Vietnamese officers as well as MACV believed a "near-total" interdiction against the Ho Chi Minh Trail was essential if the war was not to go increasingly in Hanoi's favor. Yet all agreed that the South Vietnamese Air Force could never assume a role approaching anything like Seventh Air Force's effectiveness, and the entire notion of leaving trail interdiction to the RVNAF in the near future was still embryonic in the latter's minds. Further, South Vietnamese forces had become so accustomed to U. S. air support: "prepping" by the B-52s and tactical air before any combat activity, helicopters for insertion, extraction, resupply and medevac, that it was questionable to what extent they could "de-Americanize" and "use their legs like the NVA," as General Lam put it. Mr. Sullivan felt there should be more effort to "wean them away" from dependence on American support while we were still there and able to save them from any major disaster.

(S) There were many other obstacles: South Vietnam's lack of an intelligence collection capability, the short range of their helicopters, the difficulties in making any real changes in CRIMP, and the lack of skilled manpower to facilitate any expansion. Sullivan believed that "unfortunately," a permanent means of interdicting NVA reinforcements was unlikely of achievement. The only realistic alternative for Vietnamizing interdiction was some limited combination of air and ground operations. By supporting modest CRIMP modifications, we could give them some additional offshore and cross-border interdiction capabilities to at least limit the free growth and expansion of North Vietnam's infiltration network. This might "perhaps" improve the "reasonable chance" of survival which our current program was providing. He reported that the Seventh Air Force had



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indicated "a strong willingness" to help indoctrinate the VNAF on Commando Hunt operations, and was discussing the possibility of flying either U.S. or VNAF AC-119s with mixed crews for training. The Air Force RDT&E unit in SVN, although already cut way back, was still working on such germane items as introduction of the CBU-55, operational testing of a Pave Sword laser spot identification system for F-4s, cooperative beacons for ground troops supported by gunships, and a simple ground-directed bombing system for the VNAF. 18

#### JCS Compromises as Secretary Laird Continues to Insist

(FC) The JCS answered Secretary Laird's new directive on 12 November. They said the field commanders were fully aware of continued U.S. reductions and the ultimate termination of U.S. interdiction efforts and the urgency of developing an adequate GVN interdiction capability. Development of the latter was under intensive and continuing review by MACV. The principal concern of field commanders was that any programs developed should be capable of execution by the RVNAF without U.S. support and without prohibitive trade-offs in other areas. For example, South Vietnam had to put primary emphasis on internal security, and the type and scale of its interdiction operations depended on what forces were available after this need had been met. JCS noted that MACV was accelerating its current joint review of the CRIMP with JCS in order to assess overall GVN strategy, their willingness to undertake additional interdiction operations by fall 1972, and the extent to which the RVNAF might undertake the desired interdiction missions. JCS observed that the GVN would be reluctant to expend trained personnel and valuable equipment in cross-border raids unless the targets developed justified the risks, especially in the absence of U.S. air and helicopter support.

(FC) In RVNAF air interdiction developments, JCS stated that training in targeting and intelligence functions was scheduled from 8-30 November 71. The VNAF then would tentatively achieve a limited unilateral capability in Commando Hunt VII operations by 1 December 71. Although allocation of VNAF sorties to interdiction targets would depend on decisions by JCS and the military region commanders, VNAF would be encouraged to schedule a minimum of 10 percent of its A-1, F-5, and A-37 sorties for interdiction missions against trucks,

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truck parks, base camps, supply points, and LOCs in the low threat areas of Cambodia and southern Laos. Basing additional aircraft at Pleiku, as Secretary Laird had suggested, was impracticable because of space and headroom problems, but the JCS had agreed to accept use of Phu Cat air base and this should improve the VNAF's interdiction capabilities. As for the CBU-55s, to date only 1,300 had been procured for USAF and none for the VNAF, although an additional 10,000 were scheduled for delivery in FY 73. The VNAF was increasing its participation in coastal surveillance, but while it could perform maritime patrol now flown by Navy P-3s, this would require dedication of additional aircraft beyond those currently programmed, or diversion of flying time from other missions. Whether STOL aircraft would be introduced into the VNAF inventory, and how many, depended on further evaluation of the mini-gunship concept. The feasibility of implanting sensors in medium threat areas by modifying A-37s to carry SUU-25 dispensers was under study. Plans to replace the VNAF's AC-47s with AC-119Ks were under way, and modification of A-37s, both to permit sensor delivery and the mounting of 20 mm cannon and radar equipment, was under consideration. In addition, the USAF was exploring the possibility of accelerating activation of the VNAF-A-1 and A-37 squadrons currently programmed for the second quarter of FY 73 and of trading off one VNAF transport squadron for an additional gunship squadron. JCS ended their reply to Secretary Laird by saying they could make only tentative judgments on these proposed changes and that they shared the concern of field commanders that RVNAF interdiction capabilities should be developed without excessive degradation of other functions, i. e., a proliferation of systems could disrupt or overwhelm nascent RVNAF capabilities in various skilled areas. 19

~~TOP SECRET~~ The JCS thus seemed to be moving more positively in trying to Vietnamize interdiction. Admiral Moorer, at a press conference on 19 November after returning from Southeast Asia, said "the South Vietnamese will undoubtedly take what action they can to interdict the flow of supplies because that's really

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the key to the future military operations of North Vietnam in South Vietnam." But Secretary Laird was anxious for speedier results. On 29 November, he wrote to Admiral Moorer, noting there was "a clear necessity to proceed immediately with procurement action for STOL aircraft" for the VNAF, and asking confirmation of a military requirement for them by 3 December.<sup>20</sup> Admiral Moorer temporized in his 3 December reply, asking until 10 December to respond, when General Ryan would be back from the far east with first hand comments on the matter.<sup>21</sup> Secretary Laird acceded to his request, but used the opportunity to make another impassioned plea on the Vietnamization of interdiction. He said he wanted to emphasize:<sup>22</sup>

- (a) I believe we must move expeditiously in Vietnamizing interdiction operations.
- (b) We must be prepared for contingencies in which the U. S. interdiction role could be dramatically lessened.
- (c) We must not put at jeopardy the positive results of the past three years in SEA through slowness -- despite obstacles -- to move ahead on Vietnamizing the interdiction role.
- (d) As I have indicated before, we should not limit our thinking about interdiction simply to the air role or to a mirror-image of past U. S. operations. The South Vietnamese should be able to adopt different and perhaps more effective techniques.
- (e) I am looking to you the Chiefs, CINCPAC and MACV for the ideas, programs and results which will allow us to insure the necessary interdiction capability in the months and years ahead.

#### The Air Force and the "Credible Chase" Program

(15) The Air Force had throughout the year tried to support Secretary Laird's wishes on Vietnamizing interdiction, and continued to do so. On 27 November, the Vice Chief of Staff, General John C. Meyer, told Air Staff agencies the Chief of Staff had "directed that aggressive, timely and integrated action be taken by Air Staff and major commanders to implement the

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Vietnamization of interdiction program. Each major staff agency was to appoint an individual responsible for insuring the timely implementation of actions required in this fundamental area of responsibility. " <sup>23</sup> One of the Air Force's major efforts toward helping Vietnamize interdiction was sponsorship of the "mini-gunship" program for giving the VNAF a large number of light, armed STOL aircraft to increase its firepower and mobility. With Secretary Laird's strong encouragement, the Air Force had vigorously supported the program, known as "Credible Chase", and continued to do so through the end of 1971. These efforts did not meet with the hoped for success however. The JCS and the field commanders had never been too enthusiastic about the program and in their postponed reply of 10 December (see above), JCS told Secretary Laird that CINCPAC and MACV could establish no military requirement for the STOL aircraft. MACV recommended that inclusion of STOL aircraft into the VNAF inventory be deferred "til data assure that Credible Chase is a practicable and supportable option related to the realities of RVN. " <sup>24</sup> (For a more detailed account of the Credible Chase program, see Appendix 1).

( ) JCS added that they were considering other options for improving the RVNAF interdiction capability, including accelerated production of F-5E aircraft. This aircraft had a capability for interdiction in a high threat environment and would also provide increased air defense capability in the face of increased MIG activity. Air interdiction depended on air superiority and a VNAF defense capability would become increasingly important in the absence of U. S. forces. <sup>25</sup> On 30 December 1971, Secretary Laird approved the FY 73 procurement of the remaining 57 VNAF F-5E aircraft--half of which had not been planned for purchase until FY 74. <sup>26</sup> Clearly, the plans for Vietnamization of interdiction, like various other plans, were being shaped in the last months of 1971 not just by the urgency of U. S. withdrawal policies, but by North Vietnam's new aggressiveness in the air as well. (see Chapter III).

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## V. USAF REDUCTIONS AND EFFECTIVENESS

The Dilemma of Cutting Back While Still Fighting

(S) Along with the "urgent measures" to improve RVNAF effectiveness, the planners had an equally urgent imperative to reduce U. S. forces in South Vietnam, including USAF units, down to levels desired by the President. Despite continuing high air support requirements, the Air Force had already made substantial reductions of 16,148 spaces during 1969 and 1970. In 1971 the pressures for reductions increased, with 18,923 scheduled for withdrawal by the end of the year.<sup>1</sup> For domestic political reasons, especially the upcoming presidential election, the President had to fulfill his commitment to get out of Vietnam. Along with announcements of drastic ground force reductions, there were numerous public statements about cutbacks in air power too. At the same time, the administration was still counting heavily on air power to further its overall SEA policies. Meeting the new cutback requirements while trying to respond to the unabated dependence on air power, presented a serious dilemma for the Air Force. Not surprisingly, there was an almost desperate tone in Secretary Laird's 7 April memo to the Service Secretaries addressing this problem:

DOD planning for activity levels in SEA is now at the crucial juncture. We must continue pursuit of U. S. foreign policy goals. It is incumbent on us to do so in SEA concurrently with a continuing decline in U. S. involvement. There will be pressures and temptations to hold onto the reins in SEA. This will apply especially in the area of air support.

We need now to look urgently for imaginative options which would, with acceptable risks, be used to allow us to diminish our direct role . . . all of us need to apply our best efforts. . . Through a joint, cooperative effort we can, in my judgment, achieve our goal . . . <sup>2</sup>

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Moving to Thailand

(S) Secretary Laird appeared to find one such "imaginative options" for solving this dilemma by proposing to move U. S. air units out of South Vietnam to Thailand. As he wrote in another memo less than a week later to the Secretary of the Air Force and the Chairman of the JCS:

When responding to my 7 April memo, consideration should be given to specific trade-offs of RVN based tac air units for Thai based squadrons. Our previous programming has envisioned parallel redeployment of forces from RVN and Thailand. We may now wish to examine a new approach and address an alternative deployment posture in which tac air in SVN is reduced to zero by end FY 72 while retaining Thai-based air sufficient to provide Air Force sortie levels of 10,000 a month at the end of FY 71, 5,000 at end of FY 72, for an average per month of 7,500. 3

The Air Staff, after examining this proposal, said an early phaseout of RVN-based USAF tactical air could be accomplished, with some operational degradations and some funding and manpower adjustments, and so advised Secretary Seamans.<sup>4</sup> The latter told Secretary Laird he concurred with the need for imaginative options to help us reduce our direct air role in SEA. The primary impact of a shift to Thailand however, would be a significant increase in the required manpower authorizations in Thailand.<sup>5</sup> This judgment proved only too accurate. Throughout 1971, the failure to get increased space authorizations in Thailand remained the obstacle to Secretary Laird's hopeful suggestion. Early in the spring, the U. S. Ambassador to Thailand observed that the Thai political climate towards the United States had cooled recently because they were uncertain of the direction U. S. foreign policy was taking in light of our withdrawal policies. The Ambassador was worried because although the U. S. Army had largely completed its reductions in Thailand, there was an apparent lack of USAF action. He had committed himself to the Thais on withdrawals, would feel "betrayed" if they lagged, and would strongly resist any request for upward adjustment. 6

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(S) Nevertheless, because of critical needs, the Air Force, JCS, and the field commanders had no choice but to try to get some relief from the Thai manpower ceiling. Already on 5 May, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Ryan, told the JCS he was concerned that the present end FY 71 Thai manpower ceiling no longer represented a reasonable planning objective. The FY 71 redeployment package (Banner Sun) had been carried generally out as planned. But in the meantime, additional requirements had emerged, as the result of approval for various additional deployments into Thailand. General Ryan listed the major actions, including:

Deployment of B-57G squadron to Udorn, provision of 6 additional F-105G Wild Weasel aircraft and retention of 6 EB-66 aircraft to counter growing North Vietnamese defenses near infiltration routes of southern Laos, deployment of 6 additional AC-130 gunships, retention of A-1 squadron scheduled for redeployment, consolidation of Arc Light assets at U Tapao, temporary increase in Arc Light bomber and protective forces, and consolidation of cryptologic personnel at Udorn. Additional manpower deployed to support these approved forces and activities significantly offset the Banner Sun withdrawals, thereby creating a very real problem in meeting present end FY 71 manpower ceiling objective. 7

The Air Force Chief added that there were early FY 72 additions already programmed which would have space requirements further compounding the problem: certain urgent intelligence activities (Cobra Talon\* and Senior Book)\*\* and six AC-130A gunships for strengthening interdiction forces. He also noted Secretary Laird's proposal for additional improved interdiction capabilities, and his recommendation for basing

\* Chinese Communist ICBM tracking radar

\*\* Airborne communications intelligence activities

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residual air elements in Thailand, which, if adopted, would further impact on manpower requirements. He recommended that the end FY 70 manpower ceiling for Thailand be retained into FY 72. <sup>8</sup>

(S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff relayed General Ryan's memos to Secretary Laird and seconded his request for adjustment of the Thai manpower ceiling. They also recommended asking the Secretary of State to inform the Thais of U. S. intentions and of the possibility that "a certain rebalancing of forces between Thailand and RVN could be requested in FY 72." <sup>9</sup> On 17 June however, Secretary Laird replied that the current target of 32,200 spaces for end FY 71 was adequate and therefore necessary space tradeoffs should be made to insure that this ceiling was not exceeded. <sup>10</sup>

#### The Air Force Position and Field Reactions

(S) General Ryan's reaction was unequivocal. He told the JCS that if USAF was to meet JCS FY 72 sortie level requirements and stay within its Thai authorizations, it would have to:

- Redeploy B-57G squadron to CONUS in FY 1/72.
- Redeploy 6 RF-4Cs to CONUS instead of to Thailand as approved in Increment #8.
- Redeploy the 480th TFS to CONUS instead of to Thailand as proposed in Redeployment Increment #9.
- Reduce the EC-121 force to 3 UE.

This would make 1,303 spaces available in FY 1/72 to accommodate the required intelligence activities, programmed flying hour increases for F-105s and EB-66s, movement of DART (Deployable Automatic Relay Terminal) from RVN to Thailand, and consolidation of an AC-119K gunship squadron at Nakhon Phanom. <sup>11</sup>

(S) Not surprisingly, these Air Force redeployment proposals did not find favor in the field. The decision to return the 480th Tactical Fighter Squadron to the United States by the end of November 1971 in accordance with Redeployment Increment #9 especially met disapproval. COMUSMACV said retention of the squadron in SEA until April or May 1972 was



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essential, and CINCPAC agreed. <sup>12</sup> In fact, CINCPAC informed JCS on 1 September that a decision had been made to retain the 480th in South Vietnam; it should be deleted from the Increment #9 troop list and substitute spaces identified. <sup>13</sup> General Ryan maintained that since the Secretary of Defense had not yet made a final decision on FY 72-73 sortie levels, it was premature to remove the 480th from the redeployment list. He recommended that no prior change be made. <sup>14</sup> On 20 September Secretary Laird decided in favor of returning the 480th by approving the JCS recommended Option 3 sortie allocation, which called for retention of only 13 USAF fighter attack squadrons. (see p 104) The 480th was excess to those requirements, and JCS recommended it be returned to CONUS in Increment #9, and the field commanders so informed. If an urgent requirement arose for additional F-4 sorties, JCS was prepared to send additional F-4s from units based at Clark Air Force Base. <sup>15</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) This discussion about the 480th was part of USAF's difference with CINCPAC over the number of squadrons retainable in SEA in the FY 72 structure. CINCPAC had wanted the Air Force to keep 14 squadrons rather than the 13 USAF proposed. The field commanders sought a higher aircraft utilization rate than did USAF because they construed the prescribed sortie levels to be attack sorties only, whereas Air Force planning included both attack and non-attack sorties. CINCPAC was concerned that both types of sorties could not be flown in the force structure proposed by the Air Force. His plans called for basing plans keeping three F-4 squadrons at Da Nang through FY 73, while the Air Force wanted to keep only two after the second quarter of FY 72. <sup>16</sup> These differences were ultimately resolved by the decision to adopt Option 3 with its greater reliance on carrier-based air. (see below, p 103)

(~~TOP SECRET~~) General Ryan's recommendation to redeploy the B-57G squadron from Thailand to the United States in the first quarter of FY 72 likewise met with efforts to retain it in the field. Thus, when the Secretary of the Air Force confirmed to Secretary Laird General Ryan's decision to redeploy the squadron, he added that discussions with Ambassador Unger and Major General Andrew J. Evans, Jr., USAF MACTHAI, indicated the Thais would accept personnel surges beyond the present ceiling if they were reasonable and temporary. He therefore asked for temporary relief from the Thai ceiling to accommodate

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continued deployment of the B-57G Squadron "til we are able to assess more accurately the anticipated magnitude of North Vietnamese infiltration and the success our gunships and other tactical air assets are achieving in stemming this flow."<sup>17</sup> On 4 September Secretary Laird granted this temporary authorization, to be valid til the end of 1971.<sup>18</sup> By late November, when North Vietnam's counter-air interdiction activity was intensifying, the Secretary of the Air Force, upon the advice of the Air Staff asked Secretary Laird for a further extension of this authority.<sup>19</sup> He said "General Ryan and I have evaluated in detail the magnitude of current NVN efforts along infiltration routes and concluded we should recommend retention of the B-57G squadron in Thailand through the current dry season. . . . It is a proven 'truck-killing' system which will have an increased capability over last season due to improvements in detection systems and armament. Its redeployment during December 1971 would delete a significant interdiction capability at the onset of the dry season campaign when it would be most productive in stemming NVN infiltration." He asked for an extension of the authority until the end of FY 72.<sup>20</sup> Secretary Laird authorized this, with the stipulation that by 31 January JCS re-allocate other military personnel spaces among the Services to provide those needed to retain the B-57G squadron.<sup>21</sup>

#### The President's New Withdrawal Deadlines

( ) While the Air Force was thus recommending withdrawals and the field commanders opposing them, the pressures of overall Administration withdrawal policies intensified. Up to summer 1971, MACV planning had been predicated on getting down to 60,000 men by September 1972, but on 18 June Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard submitted plans for getting to this level by June instead of September.<sup>22</sup> On 6 August, Secretary Laird asked Admiral Moorer, CJCS, to study this concept further, and to develop two optional forces for achieving it: one to be a force maximizing in-country helicopter lift.<sup>23</sup> JCS complied on 20 August, postulating one force which, when combined with VNAF assets, would be able to lift the assault elements of about 13 ARVN battalions. Adding any more

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helicopters, they said, would not leave a balanced capability for protecting U.S. forces and installations and would mean relocating intelligence assets and tactical air assets needed for Laos interdiction operations to Thailand. They expressed strong opposition to reducing U.S. forces to 60,000 by 1 July 1972, instead of to 90,000 as recommended by MACV. Such an acceleration of withdrawals would bring further risk to remaining U.S. forces and possible degradation of USAF attack sorties and other USAF support as early as April 1972, creating a major adverse impact on the 71-72 dry season interdiction campaign. 24

~~(S)~~ Secretary Laird said he was fully cognizant of the reasons for adhering to MACV's redeployment plan, but overall U.S. objectives in SEA required otherwise. JCS was to assume there would be a 60,000 U.S. force by 1 July 1972 and that helicopter support for the RVNAF was to be a priority mission. Tactical air and tactical airlift would be performed by out-of-country and offshore forces to the maximum extent feasible. "Extraordinary procedures" to insure adequate air defense and timely tactical air support would be employed in preference to retaining in-country forces and basing. He concluded:

I cannot stress enough the necessity for accomplishing immediately those tasks which will place U.S. forces in a posture to carry out any redeployment plan the President should choose to announce in November. Administrative difficulties such as logistic retrograde or base turnover must not be allowed to limit the President's options. 25

Again the JCS complied and provided Secretary Laird on 22 October with the required two 60,000 force structure options. But they did not hide their true feelings. They said they supported the position of the field commanders: although the risks appeared acceptable at this time, changes in the current situation could seriously endanger the security of U.S. forces and installations, jeopardize achievement of orderly retrograde and disrupt the momentum of CRIMP. 26

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(U) On 12 November, the President announced the redeployment of 45,000 U. S. forces from RVN between 1 December 1971 and 30 April 1972. MACV amended his earlier plan to adjust to the changes. In doing so, he said the "balanced posture" of the remaining forces could not be retained to the same degree, U. S. goals for Vietnam might not be attained, and risks to the security of U. S. forces and installations would cause greater concern with the earlier stand-down of combat and combat support units. The USAF would close Phan Rang air base and redeploy some 6,000 men by 30 June 1972. The constraints imposed were the strength ceiling in Thailand and the rapidly decreasing ramp space available as the VNAF activated additional squadrons. The amended plan, signed "Abrams", ended, saying: "For the first time in U. S. military history, a command is required to press on with a vigorous war effort while simultaneously dismantling its force structure. 27

#### Sortie Rates

(U) While reducing its force structure in SEA, the Air Force was also supposed to reduce its sortie rates. The President boasted in April that U. S. attack air sorties had been reduced by 45 percent since he came to office, and said they would continue to go down. "But, on the other hand," he said, "we must retain that air power . . . as long as we have a prisoner problem and as long as there is still time needed for the South Vietnamese to develop . . . self-defense." 28 His statement epitomized the Air Force's dilemma. Throughout 1971, USAF was caught between carrying out the sortie reductions urged by Secretary Laird and the Department of Defense, and maintaining sortie rates at high levels as urged by CINCPAC and MACV.

#### JCS vs Secretary Laird and the USAF

(U) Sortie rates at the beginning of 1971 were 14,000 a month for tactical air, 1,000 for gunships, and 1,000 for B-52s, and they remained at these levels through June of that year. 29 The battle over FY 72 rates began early in 1971. Budget decisions of December 1970 had provided for FY 72 rates of

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10,000 sorties a month for tactical air, 1,000 for B-52s and 700 for gunships, and on 21 January the Chairman of the JCS, Admiral Moorer, asked Secretary Laird to authorize these rates. Moorer said retention of the flexible U. S. air capability was essential to successful prosecution of the war and the success of Vietnamization.<sup>30</sup> The Air Force opposed these sortie levels because it could not meet them under its planned force reductions. True, with additional funds and manpower it could support them, but, as General Ryan said, Air Force planning also required these assets for other purposes: for support and modernization of squadrons committed to NATO and the Republic of Korea, and possibly to Israel. Further, supporting additional squadrons in SEA meant retention of training, pipeline, logistics, and personnel capabilities currently planned for reduction and stabilization.<sup>31</sup>

(S) Secretary Laird told JCS on 9 February that, with the military uncertainty in both Cambodia and Laos and the fact that it was too early to assess the current dry season campaign, it would be inappropriate to make a firm decision on sortie rates at this time.<sup>32</sup> The next day, Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard issued new tentative fiscal guidance for FY 73-77 which provided for an average of 7,500 USAF tactical air sorties a month through FY 72, but decreasing to 5,000 sorties a month by the end of the fiscal year.<sup>33</sup> On 16 February JCS reaffirmed to Secretary Laird the field commanders' requirement for 10,000 tactical air sorties, calling them "prudent planning goals," though conceding that they would mean Air Force retention of an additional five tactical air squadrons in SEA at end FY 72, a 5,000-man end strength increase, and retention of a tactical fighter wing now programmed for inactivation.<sup>34</sup> But a week later, Secretary Laird told JCS that Packard's guidance should now be used for planning future activity levels,<sup>35</sup> and on 25 February JCS referred these instructions to CINCPAC. JCS said that current service budgets would support an average of 10,200 (7,500 USAF and 2,700 USN) tactical air sorties a month in FY 72, but service planning provided for a decline to 7,100 sorties [5,000 USAF and 2,100 USN] at the end of the fiscal year.<sup>36</sup>

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(S) A month later, on 26 March, JCS again recommended the higher rates. Providing Secretary Laird with the assessments he had requested on various redeployment alternatives, they said redeployment rates under any of the alternatives were "critically contingent on provision of U.S. sortie levels of 10,000 and 8,000 tactical air sorties a month through FY 72 and FY 73 respectively, and 1,000 B-52 sorties through FY 73." On 3 April, Admiral Moorer urged Secretary Laird to consider the service program adjustments necessary to provide these rates. Of urgent concern, he said, was Navy programming, which involved a lengthy program of inactivation of aircraft carriers and air wings. If adjustments to Navy sorties were judged impracticable, further adjustments in the Air Force structure in SEA would have to be considered. <sup>37</sup>

#### The President's Guidance on Sortie Rates

(S) That current guidance and programming might indeed require some changes became evident when it was seen that the sortie rate figures urged by CJCS--and opposed by Secretary Laird and the Air Force--were even lower than those stipulated by Dr. Kissinger, who relayed Presidential instructions on 1 April. Kissinger said the analysis should assume "maintenance of U.S. tactical air sorties at 10,000 a month and B-52 sorties at 1,000 a month through combat\* year 1972, with illustrative optional reductions considered for combat\* year 1973 and beyond." <sup>38</sup> This certainly did not jibe with Secretary Packard's tentative fiscal year guidance of 10 February.

#### The USAF Supports Secretary Laird

(S) Secretary Laird, nevertheless, continued to urge reduction of the air role in SEA. On 7 April he told the service secretaries to guard against "pressures and temptations to hold onto the reins in SEA," noting that this applied especially to air support. <sup>39</sup> In a memo a week later to the Secretary of the Air Force and CJCS, he again cited the sortie figures in the Packard guidance memo as those to follow. <sup>40</sup> The Secretary of the Air Force agreed with Secretary Laird:

\* Author's emphasis.

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TOTAL SORTIES - RVN - ALL SERVICES - 1971

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
USAF	35,247	31,825	33,922	33,401	32,097	27,646	27,459	24,999	22,189	19,368	15,943	15,074
VNAF	34,087	34,954	38,007	42,361	44,476	45,125	53,337	58,376	63,745	59,477	64,148	66,713
USN	60	118	222	250	119	418	461	370	281	30	9	0
USMC	28,798	26,626	20,293	16,413	3,279	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
USA	457,371	430,760	435,020	387,702	392,175	357,845	357,471	369,962	339,135	293,982	250,763	213,792
RAAF	1,272	1,119	1,254	1,164	1,192	592	623	645	576	579	478	403
TOTAL	556,835	525,402	528,718	481,291	473,338	431,626	439,351	454,352	425,926	373,436	331,341	295,982

TOTAL SORTIES - CAMBODIA - ALL SERVICES - 1971

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
USAF	4,776	3,886	3,936	3,834	3,347	3,612	2,470	2,237	2,230	2,126	2,283	2,485
VNAF	1,400	1,772	1,751	1,727	2,076	1,906	2,039	446	1,583	2,163	2,200	3,110
USN	-	-	23	83	-	34	6	2	-	11	20	-
USMC	6	-	-	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
USA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,589	4,757
RAAF	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	6,182	5,658	5,710	5,644	5,431	5,552	4,515	2,685	3,813	4,300	11,092	10,352

Source: PACAF, Summary of Air Ops

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TOTAL SORTIES - IAGC - ALL SERVICES - 1971

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
USAF	13,299	11,823	13,953	12,068	10,072	5,208	2,970	2,444	2,314	7,161	9,462	8,962
VNAF	-	-	-	16	-	4	-	-	-	-	-	108
USN	4,382	5,023	5,763	5,108	2,396	2,056	1,562	1,545	1,148	1,223	1,980	2,131
USMC	831	811	737	483	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
USA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	711	575	725
RLAF	-	-	-	4,286	3,369	2,616	2,560	2,863	3,345	-	4,136	4,545
TOTAL	18,512	17,657	20,453	21,960	15,859	9,884	7,092	6,852	6,807	9,095	16,153	17,196

TOTAL SORTIES - NORTH VIETNAM - ALL SERVICES - 1971

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
USAF	977	835	894	1,159	958	617	575	641	671	293	421	1,135
VNAF	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
USN	745	841	859	1,051	1,301	1,095	1,346	1,226	1,089	909	650	1,892
USMC	36	16	-	77	29	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
USA	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
RLAF	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	1,758	1,692	1,753	2,287	2,288	1,712	1,921	1,867	1,760	1,202	1,636	3,027

Source: PACAF, Summary of Air Ops

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I assure you the Air Force wants and needs to reduce its level of operations. Our modernization program could be jeopardized and other essential Air Force programs affected if we don't phase down our activities in SEA . . . I am concerned about the adverse impact significantly higher sortie levels could have on priority Air Force objectives . . . 41

Secretary Seamans made it very clear that any FY 72 sortie requirements for the Air Force in excess of those specified in the Packard guidance would require supplemental funding and additional manpower. The Air Staff had made preliminary cost estimates showing the Air Force would need approximately \$200 million in supplemental funds in FY 72 and \$600 million in FY 73 to support the higher sortie levels. The secretary felt that expressions of requirements by field commanders were "certainly pertinent," but so were broader considerations of overall U. S. policy in SEA and political considerations. 42

(TS) On 26 April, JCS presented a strong rebuttal in favor of the higher sortie rate. They said adoption of the lower levels would invalidate the assumptions on which redeployment projections and I & M programs were based. They recognized the need to reduce all U. S. commitments in SEA, including air, but it was premature to modify the higher sortie requirements. There first had to be a complete evaluation of future enemy activity, the effects of cross-border operations and qualitative improvements in air interdiction operations--all currently underway. 43

(S) At about this time, on 24 April, Secretary Laird also sought to cut B-52 sortie rates back to the authorized level of 1,000 from the 1,200 a month rate flown since 24 February in support of Lam Son 719. 44 (see above p 16) Admiral Moorer explained that the higher B-52 rates had been continued in order to exploit the lucrative targets developed as a result of that campaign's ground operations in Laos, and to limit the flow of enemy supplies into Cambodia and southern RVN. 45 Already on 3 March General Ryan had asked for a re-evaluation of B-52 activity levels in an attempt to get them back to programmed levels. 46 When CINCPAC said the higher rates were necessary through May and asked what the implications of continuing them were, General Ryan replied that the 1,200 a month rates at the higher bomb loadings introduced during Lam Son 719

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were incurring an unprogrammed expenditure of \$11.2 million a month. They would also significantly reduce the MK-84 war readiness materiel stockpile by 118,000 weapons if continued through May. He recommended conversion to standard bomb loadings beginning 1 May and return to 1,000 B-52 sortie a month after 1 June. <sup>47</sup> After reviewing B-52 sortie requirements, JCS subsequently directed the return to 1,000 sorties a month beginning 1 June. <sup>48</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) In its mid-May "RVN Assessment" study, directed by Dr. Kissinger, the JCS used the presidential figures quoted by Kissinger, i. e., "at least 1,000 B-52 and 10,000 tactical air sorties would be available during each month of combat year 1972." <sup>49</sup> JCS said that under any residual force options for 1972, the principal U.S. support would be the 1,000 B-52, 10,000 tactical air and 700 gunship sorties a month, which would permit continued air interdiction of enemy LOCs and support of RVNAF operations against the enemy. <sup>50</sup> On 2 June, the Joint Staff cited MACV and CINCPAC as both emphasizing that 10,000 and 8,000 tactical air sorties a month throughout FY 72 and 73 respectively, and 1,000 B-52 sorties a month throughout FY 73 were essential for any FY 72-73 force structure model. <sup>51</sup> JCS reiterated this position in a 10 June study on RVNAF cross border operations and again in their SEA strategy evaluation of the same date. <sup>52</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) In early June, the Secretary of the Air Force went to Southeast Asia to find ways, as he said, to reduce U.S. air support in conjunction with increasing the air capabilities of friendly SEA countries. His conversations with the U.S. Ambassador to Thailand illustrate some of the complexities of trying to reduce air activity in Southeast Asia. The Ambassador repeatedly stressed the importance of continuing air operations in Laos, lest the Thais interpret termination of U.S. air activities as signalling a slackening in U.S. Government support for them. Secretary Seamans, on the other hand, emphasized the tremendous cost of continuing air sorties at current levels and Secretary Laird's difficulty in finding a way to support them as General Abrams wanted, particularly at a time when the White House and JCS were reluctant to go below the General's recommendations. Political support for continuing operations throughout SEA was getting increasingly scarce and "support of any kind might be withdrawn completely if we couldn't reduce the budget-

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ary drain." Seamans said he intended to discuss B-52 sortie rates with General Abrams and to press for cuts in operations by more selective targeting. He also hoped to achieve further tactical air reductions by increasing the number of AC-130 gunships and by increasing Royal Laotian Air Force sortie rates. <sup>53</sup>

#### Effectiveness vs Fixed Sortie Rates

(S) On 11 June, Secretary Laird, seeking to support General Abrams while reducing costs, took a new tack: effectiveness. He told JCS he shared their concern on the importance of retaining a fully adequate air effort in FY 72-73 to facilitate U. S. redeployment and Vietnamization. To accomplish this, he said:

. . . it would seem to me the focus might appropriately be on adequacy and effectiveness as opposed to any specified or pre-determined operating rates. Studies and analyses prepared by Service staffs indicate that improved aircraft, better munitions, better planning, and evolving tactics have led to significantly increased effectiveness per sortie . . . It would seem logical that this increase in air sortie effectiveness, coupled with continued growth in the capability of our Allies' air forces, would permit some reductions in U. S. sortie levels below those currently planned without reducing the overall effectiveness of our air operations. Likewise . . . [since] air support needs vary somewhat during the course of a 12 month period . . . perhaps we could logically plan to handle the highest levels of air activity through periodic surge operations, as opposed to flying at continuously high sortie levels despite the rate of other military activity . . .

Secretary Laird added that he had been impressed by JCS' strong views on the essentiality of their recommended sortie levels, but there was "little or no prospect" for securing additional funds for these sorties--indeed, he had all he could do to avoid reductions below currently planned budget levels. If the higher sortie rates were approved, reductions in other programs would be necessary. <sup>54</sup>

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### The Air Force Endorses the Effectiveness Criterion

(~~TOP SECRET~~) The Secretary of the Air Force was responsive to Secretary Laird's effectiveness suggestions. On 24 June, noting that SEA sortie levels were still under review, he told Secretary Laird that such things as improved munitions, targeting, and equipment could provide opportunities for reducing sorties in FY 72 without reducing effectiveness. Such an approach could furnish 8,000 tactical air sorties a month, permitting MACV flexibility to fly less in the rainy season, 8,000 in the dry season, plus a surge capability for short periods of just under 10,000. It could also provide for 800 B-52 sorties a month, with the same sort of flexibility, including a surge capability to about 1,000 a month by using Guam resources. <sup>55</sup> The Chief of Staff was also responsive to the effectiveness suggestion. On 21 July, he wrote to Secretary Laird, asking for further B-52 sortie reductions:

I have been concerned that flying the established B-52 sortie rate of 1,000 a month during the southwest monsoon season may be ineffective utilization of critical resources. The cumulative effects of previous bombings, coupled with heavy rains and reduced sensor activity relating to movement along the logistical supply routes, indicate lessened enemy activity and fewer lucrative targets for B-52 strikes. Additionally, some of the more recent targets are within range of friendly artillery . . . I recommend that CINCPAC, COMUSMACV and 7AF, in coordination with CINCSAC as appropriate, jointly conduct a detailed examination of current types and quality of targets available for B-52 strikes, with a view toward reducing the sortie rate during the wet season, while retaining the capability to return to programmed levels with 72 hours. <sup>56</sup> JCS sent a message to this effect to CINCPAC on 2 August. <sup>57</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) On 28 July, Secretary Seamans' Military Assistant, Col William R. Usher, followed through on the effectiveness approach, asking Major General Bray, the Air Staff Assistant for Vietnamization, for a status report on ongoing actions

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to improve USAF operational effectiveness in SEA, covering such things as B-52 targeting and measures to improve interdiction in southern Laos. General Meyer, the Vice Chief of Staff, provided a report on 6 August. He noted first the Air Force's success in getting B-52 sortie rates cut back. He went on to report that under current procedures, the B-52s using ground based radar reaction, were able to change targets in a target area within 15 minutes of release. They could now also be air diverted to a new target area on 30 minutes notice, and the mission completely replanned prior to take-off on three hours notice. On improving interdiction effectiveness, he said the Air Force would be providing the Commando Hunt VII interdiction campaign 12 AC-130s by 1 November 71 and six additional AC-130Es by 1 January 1972. The latter would have a new digital fire control computer permitting more rapid target acquisition and increased firing accuracy and would have more armor plating and be able to carry more ammunition and fuel. The time over target for AC-119K gunships would be increased by their transfer from Phan Rang Air Base in RVN to Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. Six AC-130s, 15 OV-10s, and six F-4s were getting laser designator equipment. There would be a greatly increased number of laser guided bombs (LGB) available for use during the next dry season (from 703 kits last year to 1380 this year). The F-4 wings at Udorn and Da Nang were currently acquiring an LGB delivery capability, and seven additional Pave Sword pods (laser seeking sensors) were now at Ubon. Finally, the MK-82 LGB, deliverable under slightly more restrictive weather conditions than bombs now in use was being certified for delivery from F-4s. 58

#### The JCS Position

■ The JCS disagreed with Mr. Laird's suggestions on effectiveness and said that no allied improvements or more effective air procedures would have any significant impact on sortie levels. Such factors had already been taken into account. They reaffirmed the validity of their FY 72 estimates and re-emphasized that the interdiction program was a crucial element

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of allied strategy and would have a marked impact on developments in FY 73. Effective interdiction in the Lao Panhandle, which required suppressive efforts beyond the capability of allied air elements, would have to be undertaken. The JCS agreed that the monthly sortie rate need not be constant but that fiscal planning required identification of a specific number of sorties for the year.

(13) The JCS again recommended supplemental funding, but felt the air effort in SEA for this period was of such crucial importance that they proposed reprogramming among the Services if necessary. To do this, they studied a number of options and recommended Option "D", which entailed the least risk. Under it, the Air Force would maintain 6,700 tactical air sorties a month until the last half of the fourth quarter of FY 72, and reduce to 5,000 thereafter. B-52 and gunship sortie rates would remain the same: 1,000 and 700 respectively. In FY 73, the rate would be 5,000 tactical air sorties a month until the fourth quarter, when it would drop to zero. B-52 sortie rates would be 800, reducing the number of aircraft required in Thailand to 37 through the end of Fiscal Year 1973. The unprogrammed Air Force costs in FY 72 were established at \$10 million, for advanced B-52 munitions requirements; for the following year, \$148 million. Under Option "D", a USN tactical air sortie level of 3,300 was to remain through FY 72. This meant deployment of three CVAs and DVWs to the Western Pacific (feasible due to a recently approved retention of one additional carrier) the Hancock\* in the total attack carrier

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\* As early as 1 April, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt told JCS that, depending on the rate of in-country tactical air redeployment, the Navy tactical air requirement might well be expanded. He recommended that JCS advise Secretary Laird of the impending inactivation of the carriers Hancock and Shangri La, and the importance of keeping such resources available "in order to cover anticipated contingencies." [CNO Memo (TS), 1 April 71, in JCS 2147/527, 8 Apr 71] Another CNO analysis, sent to Laird on 21 April, said . . . "the relative independence of sea-based TACAIR capability to SEA redeployment plans causes Navy to anticipate that greater demands may be made on Navy TACAIR; therefore, action should be taken at earliest to keep such options open." [JCS 2147/527-4 (TS) 22 Apr 71]

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force). Through FY 73, USN tactical air sorties would remain at 2,100 a month.<sup>59</sup> In effect, if USAF costs--and manpower and basing problems--in maintaining the desired sortie rates were too great, the U.S. Navy would take up the slack.

#### Secretary Laird Modifies His Position

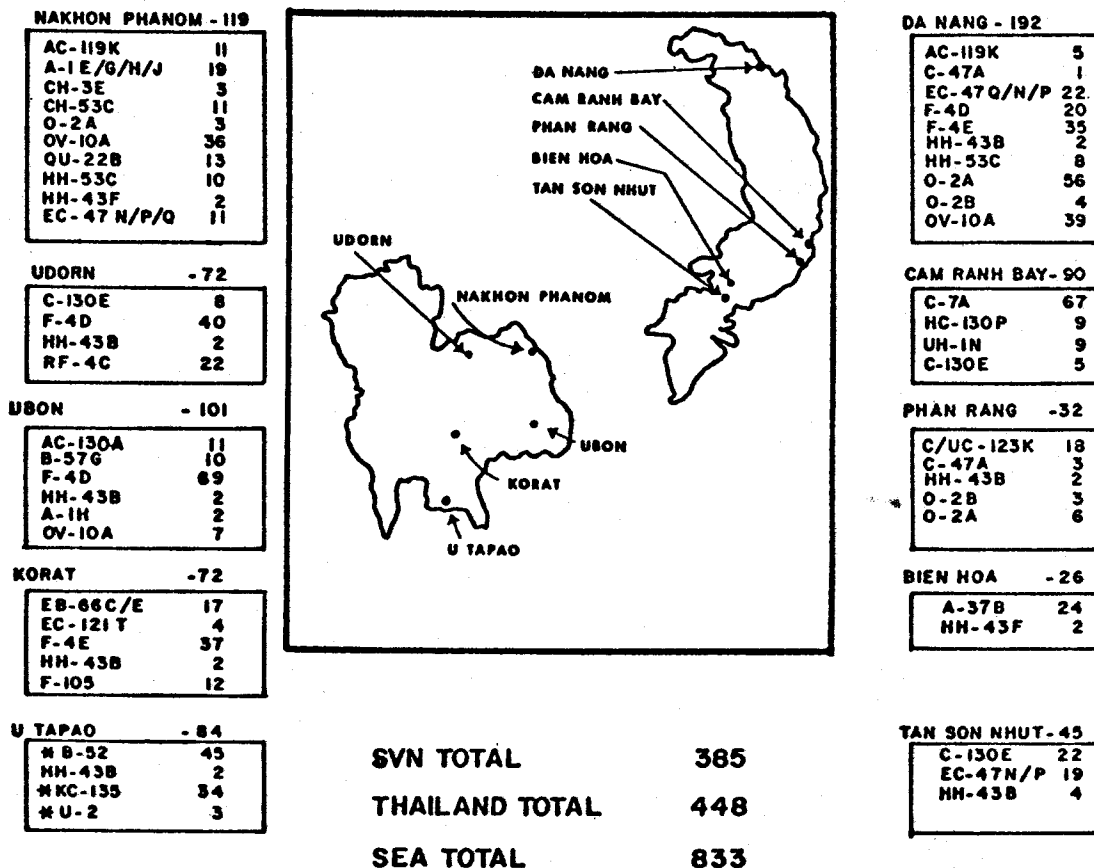
(TS) On 1 July, Secretary Laird agreed to the JCS solution for keeping the higher sortie rates. He told them that in the upcoming SRG review of air operations in SEA he was recommending that the President support the Option D rates they had recommended for FY 72. Rates for FY 73 would be reviewed at an appropriate time later. He agreed that "given the NVN threat and the need to provide maximum protection for our forces during our withdrawals, we should retain a sortie capability in FY 72 similar to that recommended in your paper."<sup>60</sup> On 12 August, Laird sent JCS the decision which the SRG had reached on sortie levels. It directed budgeting for even higher sortie rates than JCS had recommended. Gunship sorties were to be 750 a month instead of 700, and the FY 72 rates were to continue through FY 73, except for reducing tactical air sorties to 8,000. Secretary Laird asked JCS for definitive recommendations on the mix of USAF and USN sortie allocations on alternative basing plans for USAF units and on sharing formulae for costs and trade-offs.<sup>61</sup>

(TS) On 25 August, JCS replied with three options for allocating USAF and USN sorties, each varying primarily in the degree of utilization of USN aircraft carriers. They recommended Option 3, which provided

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## USAF AIRCRAFT ORDER OF BATTLE

31 DEC 71



\* 31 NOV 71 FIGURES

Source: 7AF: Comd Status Rpt  
USAF: Air Opns Review

Figure VI-1

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for utilizing the full capacity of three aircraft carriers deployed in both FY 72 and FY 73. JCS cited the prospect of continued manpower reductions in RVN and the problems of manpower ceilings and near-saturation conditions at airbases in Thailand as factors militating for maximum utilization of carrier-based air. Under this option, USAF basing would face fewer problems, since it would permit the Air Force to reduce to 13 squadrons instead of to 14 as under the other two options. If no USAF bases were retained in RVN, the 13 squadrons would have to be based in Thailand where the presently based 11 squadrons, plus other essential U.S. elements, absorbed virtually all basing. One additional squadron, though requiring an additional 625 spaces, could squeeze in, but two additional squadrons could require the reopening of Takhli airbase, and 1,250 more billeting spaces at an estimated cost of \$15 to 25 million. If two operating bases were retained in RVN, of course, no basing problems would arise. 62

(S) On 20 September, Secretary Laird told JCS he approved their recommended Option 3 essentially as written. But he asked them to defer procurement of air ordnance required for the additional sorties until FY 73, and he urged the services, "particularly the Navy, to take all steps possible to reduce costs of their SEA operations." He told them he was "gratified with our recent overall SEA air effort--and particularly the Air Force--in this regard." He thought "we should plan to derive all benefits possible" from the presence of the three carriers in the West Pacific, which should add to overall force flexibility. He said FY 73 costs should be absorbed by all the Military Departments, not just those required to fly the additional sorties, and he gave the following allocations of additional FY 73 costs: Army, \$96 million; Navy, \$106.4 million; and AF, \$102 million. 63

(S) On 28 September, Secretary Laird directed JCS and the service secretaries to be sure to maintain the 10,000 sorties

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US AIR EFFORT IN LAOS  
1970 - 1971

<u>US TACAIR Sorties</u>					<u>US Gunship Sorties</u>			
<u>1970</u>	<u>Total SEA</u>	<u>STEEL TIGER</u>	<u>BARREL ROLL</u>	<u>Percent in Laos</u>	<u>Total SEA</u>	<u>STEEL TIGER</u>	<u>BARREL ROLL</u>	<u>Percent in Laos</u>
Jul	13,684	4,469	1,444	43	336	101	26	38
Aug	12,514	3,641	1,358	40	378	64	25	24
Sep	9,905	2,654	808	35	361	38	27	18
Oct	8,002	4,318	687	63	323	24	37	19
Nov	10,212	6,625	712	72	419	105	40	35
Dec	12,412	8,239	829	72	646	322	67	60
<u>1971</u>								
Jan	13,747	9,510	697	74	742	463	77	73
Feb	13,211	8,933	997	75	737	444	97	73
Mar	16,694	11,612	1,588	80	854	488	130	72
Apr	13,627	7,652	1,531	67	842	465	129	71
May	11,717	7,466	1,485	76	747	389	130	69
Jun	<u>9,632</u>	<u>5,095</u>	<u>1,214</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>642</u>	<u>219</u>	<u>151</u>	<u>56</u>
Total	145,357	80,214	13,350	64	7,027	3,122	936	58
<u>1971</u>								
Jul	5,993	2,975	664	61	499	125	93	44
Aug	5,800	2,527	692	62	460	104	109	46
Sep	6,155	2,889	962	63	377	163	125	76
Oct	5,471	2,691	787	64	316	147	93	76
Nov	7,283	4,967	797	70	520	340	146	93
Dec	<u>8,233</u>	<u>4,726</u>	<u>989</u>	<u>69</u>	<u>642</u>	<u>503</u>	<u>120</u>	<u>96</u>
Total	38,935	20,775	4,891	52	2,814	1,382	686	71

Source: MACJ3072 SEACORDS Book

Figure TSS - 1

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a month directed by the President through FY 72 instead of transitioning down to the lower FY 73 level over a 3-month period as had been previously done. Redeployments and inactivations during the last quarter of the fiscal year should reflect the transition to lower levels, but the sorties flown should be maintained at the higher rate by relying on the surge capability of the forces in SEA or by planning to make temporary use of other CINCPAC resources.<sup>64</sup> This directive indicated only too clearly how, despite the urgent efforts to cut back air power, a counter-current of security requirements made it equally urgent not to do so. It also illustrated the efforts to accomplish the same results as before but with fewer resources, which was so typical of USAF operations in SEA in 1971.

#### USAF Effectiveness Despite Reductions

(~~TOP SECRET~~) It is unquestionably true that the Air Force reduced both forces and sorties during 1971. At the end of the year it had a total of 833 aircraft throughout Southeast Asia (compared to 1,584 in October of the year before),<sup>65</sup> and of these only about 350 were attack aircraft.<sup>66</sup> From operating out of 15 bases in South Vietnam, it was now operating out of five, and out of five in Thailand as opposed to the seven before.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, this decline was not quite as uniformly true as some of the public statements made it sound. Between February and June, for example, B-52 sorties increased from their authorized rates by 200 sorties a month. This was because COMUSMACV had felt that in the circumstances (Lam Son 719 and RVNAF operations into Cambodia), a maximum use of all available air resources was warranted. He had always had in mind to use the B-52 missions to compensate for the reduced military potential during the troop withdrawal; hence B-52 sorties did not show the usual winddown as other U.S. military activities did during 1971.<sup>68</sup> General Clay, Seventh Air Force Commander, did not feel that air action had wound down all that much either. In mid-February he agreed that during the last several months there had been a decided decline in the air operations in South Vietnam as compared to the year before. But he added:

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On the other hand, with the importance of the logistic activities of the Viet Cong, particularly as they relate to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, we find our activities up there are just as busy as ever. So I guess in substance then the answer is that, in terms of close air support in direct support of the U. S. Army in RVN, there has been a decline. But, in terms of our other activities, throughout Southeast Asia, we're still fighting a pretty busy war.<sup>69</sup>

(What was indisputably true, however, was that in 1971 the Air Force accomplished more with less. On 1 March, General Ryan said the USAF campaign to impede North Vietnamese resupply operations was significantly more effective this year than last reduced sorties.<sup>70</sup> Secretary Seamans said in November that in the last three or four years, costs had been reduced from about \$5 billion a year to about \$2 billion, and that effectiveness had actually increased in the Panhandle interdiction operations.<sup>71</sup> COMUSMACV's history for the period was explicit in praise of USAF effectiveness:

With the accelerated return of combat personnel to the U. S. and a commensurate reduction in American presence throughout SEA, air power in 1971 literally took up the slack in U. S. offensive power. The USAF reduction affected both units and personnel, yet with fewer airplanes and people, the remaining organizations provided the same type of strike missions, reconnaissance, support, interdiction, and search and rescue that had been flown in previous years. The number of missions was down from 1970 figures, but technological advances and improved weapons made up the difference in firepower. During the year ground forces, both U. S. and Allied, depended more than ever upon air power to provide the vital support which departed forces had formerly furnished . . . Despite the phasedown, the smaller number of sorties flown and fewer aircraft, the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail took a serious toll of Communists trucks and supplies, thereby preventing any generally sustained ground activity by the enemy in 1971. In the final analysis the decrease in ground combat was the best indication that air

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power was doing its most important job--preventing enemy supplies from reaching the front. This was air power's biggest accomplishment, among many splendid achievements, in 1971.<sup>72</sup>

### Air Interdiction

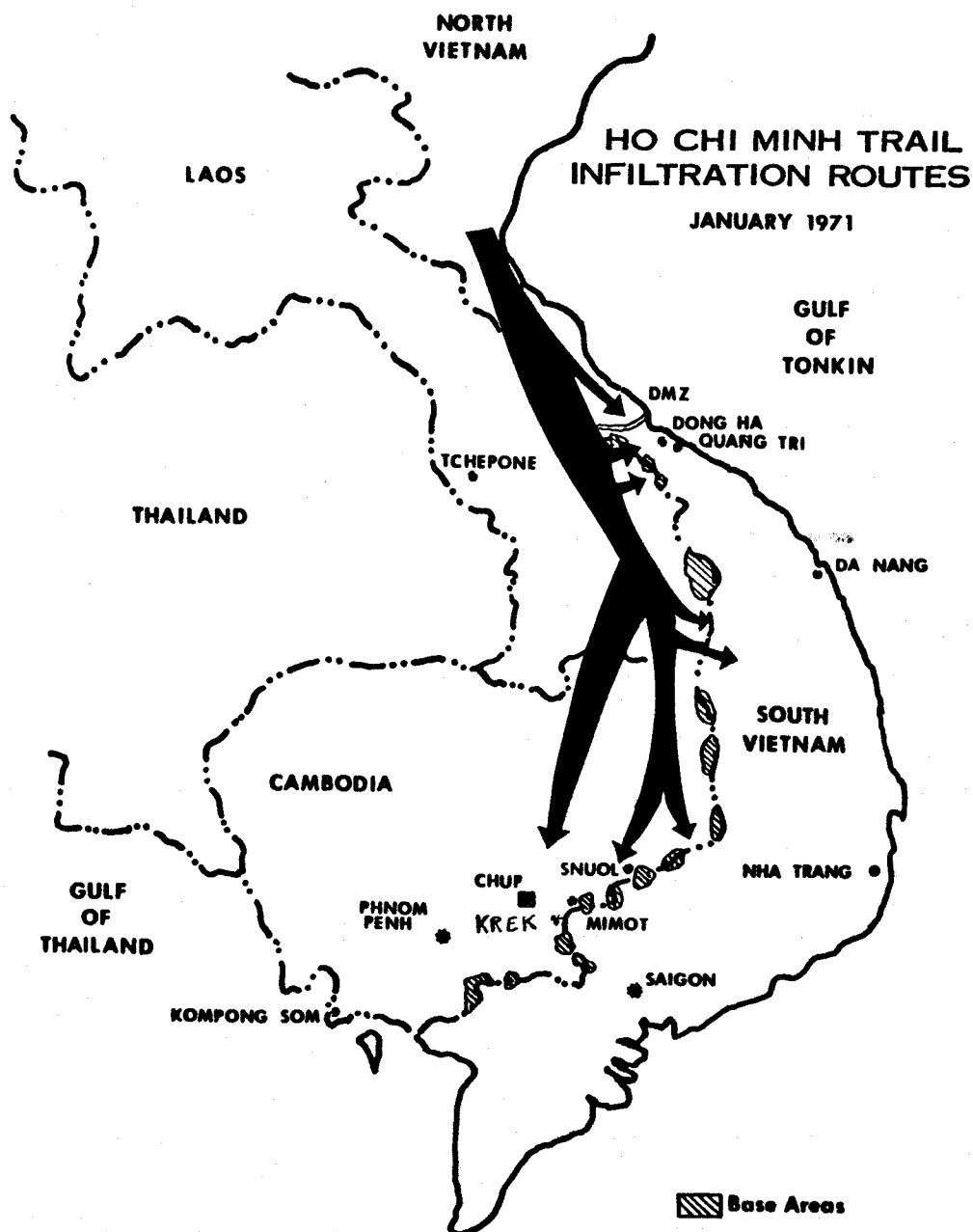
(~~TOP SECRET~~) As just noted in the MACV history quote above, the Air Force interdiction mission, criticized in the past for inadequacies, attained new effectiveness and recognition in 1971. Partly because of the strong pressures to do more with less, partly because efforts begun in the past were now coming to fruition, air interdiction results were remarkable. General Ryan reported at the beginning of March that the Air Force had destroyed or damaged nearly 70 percent more trucks during January 1971 than for the same period in 1970 even though the total number of trucks sighted was down. He said the USAF's applied R&D efforts were paying great dividends--some of its night and all-weather bombing systems were just really getting started and had shown a marked increase in effectiveness.<sup>73</sup> A short time later, Secretary Seamans told Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard that all available indications and methods of evaluation showed that the Air Force was doing much better this year than in any previous dry season and significantly impeding and disrupting enemy supply efforts.<sup>74</sup> In April he informed Secretary Laird that current dry season operations in the Steel Tiger area had accounted for enemy vehicle attrition some 70 percent greater than last year.<sup>75</sup> After a visit to Southeast Asia toward the end of the year, he said the newer gunships and new armaments were providing more efficient means to accomplish the interdiction task despite the fewer aircraft involved. He specifically cited the continued use of the very effective AC-119 and AC-130 gunships, the addition of the computerized fire control system in the B-57G, and new armament such as the laser-guided bomb.<sup>76</sup>

(~~TOP SECRET~~) Doctrinally, as well as operationally, air interdiction acquired new stature in 1971 and all developments seemed to point to it as the indispensable weapon. With U.S. ground

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forces rapidly leaving Southeast Asia, it was the most important means left for denying the enemy the capability to maintain and resupply his forces. And it became even more important as the enemy increased rather than slowed down his infiltration efforts. Besides stockpiling large amounts of supplies, he greatly expanded and improved his communications lines everywhere and, above all, strengthened their defense. Finally, in the latter half of the year, he showed strong signs of actively proceeding against the U.S. air effort itself, which was still standing in the way of his infiltration efforts. The impending offensive against an increasingly vulnerable South Vietnam, so clearly implicit in all these actions, had to be held off if current U.S. plans and policies were not to fail. The only possible answer was a continuing strong U.S. air interdiction program.

(15) Confirming this state of affairs, the interdiction of enemy resupply efforts was the objective of all the major military operations of 1971: the actions in Cambodia to prevent re-establishment of sanctuaries, the Lam Son 719 attempt to disrupt enemy supply efforts in Laos, and the U.S. air attacks against North Vietnam and its counter-air interdiction measures. Continued bombing in Steel Tiger--the area of greatest air interdiction effort--became more urgent than ever because the closing of Sihanoukville and other ports during the 1970 Cambodian incursion had forced the enemy to funnel all his resupply through that part of southern Laos. To cut back interdiction here where the enemy was exerting his greatest efforts was simply to smooth his path into South Vietnam. It is not strange then that whenever pressures intensified for cutting back, the JCS and the field commanders always replied with strong arguments on the crucial need to maintain interdiction sorties. Any reduction would permit the enemy to increase the capability of his forces significantly and alter the balance of war in his favor.<sup>77</sup> South Vietnamese officers, even more so than MACV, believed that near-total interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh trail was fundamental to bringing the war to an end and failure to do so would only step it up.<sup>78</sup> Secretaries Laird and Packard might propose and press air cuts for the sake of the budget, but JCS and the field commanders always argued just as urgently against them, and the President usually ended up on their side.

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Source: MACJ231

Figure E-1

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(S) Thus, although the debates about it went on--with stress on cutting back because of the expense--the importance of air interdiction in 1971 was acknowledged as never before. Even former opponents inclined now to agree that it had to be continued. In January, Lt Gen Robert E. Cushman, Jr. (USMC) sent the President a Watch Committee report acknowledging the effectiveness of Air Force bombing in impeding enemy infiltration. This was the first time the Watch Committee or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)--both represented by Lt Gen Cushman in this case--had so strongly endorsed the value of air interdiction.<sup>79</sup> Indeed in the past the CIA had been one of its strongest critics.<sup>80</sup> Then, in the course of two mid-March briefings, Dr. Kissinger settled a long-standing difference of opinion between the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) on assessing the amount of enemy supplies moving south through Laos. He ruled in favor of the Defense Intelligence Agency which had based its evaluations primarily on Seventh Air Force reports. CIA had discounted the latter's accuracy in computing logistical data, although it had itself offered no alternatives. Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard was particularly critical of CIA's generalizations on the subject and advised Director Richard Helms that if CIA was unable to quantify its assessments then it did not know enough about the subject to discuss it adequately. Mr. Kissinger agreed and closed the meeting by saying he accepted the analysis presented by the DIA.<sup>81</sup>

(S) In the never-ending "paper debate" over air interdiction strategy, the year 1971 also witnessed a grudgingly favorable verdict. This debate, between CIA and Systems Analysis on one side, and JCS and other military representatives on the other, had gone on for some years and often included stringent criticism of the ineffectiveness of air interdiction. The 1971 version of the debate was contained in a 51-page study, \* "FY 72-73 Air Operations in SEA," forwarded by

\* One among the many directed by Dr. Kissinger in reappraising the situation in Vietnam for the President.



Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard on 28 June. It repeated many of the earlier CIA and Systems Analysis charges of air interdiction ineffectiveness.\* But, summing up, the study noted that the extent to which the air interdiction effort carried on since 1965 had seriously limited North Vietnam's strategy choice was "not clear." And then it added, "because of the uncertainty of North Vietnam's intentions and the assessment that maintaining current levels of interdiction effectiveness may constrain the worst case strategy North Vietnam might select, the effectiveness of air interdiction efforts in FY 72 should probably be maintained at levels not significantly lower than current levels." 82 Considering the authorship of the report and its overall tenor, this was praise indeed. Even the die-hard opponents of air interdiction were afraid to do without it at this point.

(U) The new, more favorable view of air interdiction might also have been related to the poor performance of ground forces in the Lam Son 719 operation. Past critics of air interdiction had often suggested that ground forces could achieve more effective results,\*\* but now they were less optimistic. In 1971, it began to seem that the words of General George S. Brown, Seventh Air Force Commander, might be most prophetic of the ultimate verdict on interdiction:

Actually, you cannot measure what interdiction forces the enemy to do, since the real measure of merit is what it prevents him from doing . . . But I am convinced the course of the war has offered powerful evidence of what the interdiction campaign has prevented the enemy from doing . . .

History always takes a long time to assess what causes led to what effects, but I am certain that when the history of this war is completed, the interdiction

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\* See Hartsook, The Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Administration Emphasizes Air Power, 1969 (TS), Ofc of AF History, Nov 1971, pp 10-26; and The Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Role of Air Power Grows, 1970 (TS), Ofc of AF History, Sep 1972, pp 65-77.

\*\* See Hartsook, The Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Role of Air Power Grows, 1970, pp 66-71.

campaign will be recognized as an essential key to the Vietnamization program and the safe withdrawal of American combat forces. 83

### Summary

(U) In 1971, as it had since 1969, the Air Force carried most of the burden of holding off the enemy in SEA, acting as a shield while ground forces withdrew. In 1971, as before, the President explicitly supported this tactic in repeated policy statements. His continuing and, at times, expanded use of air aroused criticism and controversy, but he had no real alternative if he was to avoid the growing risk of an enemy offensive that would ruin his withdrawal and Vietnamization plans. His key strategy for thwarting Hanoi continued to be the interdiction of its resupply and reinforcements. Success of this strategy was evident not only in USAF interdiction statistics, but in the Administration's continuation of high interdiction sortie rates, in its efforts to Vietnamize the interdiction function, and finally, in the enemy's own attempts to counter U. S. air in the second half of 1971.

(C) Despite--or perhaps because of--its key national policy role in deterring Hanoi, the Air Force encountered a number of complex problems in its SEA role throughout 1971. As before, it was caught in the middle between withdrawal pressures and the combat demands of the field. Secretary Laird continually urged cutbacks and accelerated withdrawals in order to meet domestic political and financial constraints; JCS and the field commanders even more urgently insisted on high sortie rates in order to stand off the enemy. In its efforts to meet the latter's requirements, the Air Force was faced with a severe rebuff by Thailand's refusal to raise the manpower ceiling to meet space requirements, and this led to plans for an increased U. S. Navy tactical air role in FY 73. Throughout the year, the USAF also had to try to reconcile JCS and field demands with its own urgent and long-neglected resource needs in areas other than Southeast Asia. The stringent Vietnamization priorities of 1971 entailed much additional effort. The USAF had to try to telescope accelerated VNAF training and materiel requirements within ever-shrinking

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deadline and personnel constraints. It diligently sought solutions to the all but impossible task of Vietnamizing interdiction as directed by Secretary Laird. Meanwhile, with U.S. ground forces rapidly receding, it was called on throughout the year to provide the RVNAF and Cambodian forces with as much substitute muscle as possible through massive air support operations.

(C) Then, in the latter part of 1971 a new and unanticipated development complicated other USAF tasks and problems in SEA. Just as the Air Force was implementing the stepped up withdrawals of air units as scheduled to meet Administration deadlines, North Vietnam accelerated its campaign against the remaining U.S. air power in Southeast Asia. With fewer forces and sorties, and in the midst of the instability and disruption of redeployment, the Air Force had to contend with increasingly bold attacks by North Vietnam's air and air defense forces. As the year ended, one USAF unit scheduled for withdrawal (B-57G squadron) had been held over, another (a surveillance College Eye Task Force) recalled from South Korea to Thailand, and the USAF was once more carrying out massive air strikes against the North. Not only Air Force withdrawal plans, but the most fundamental plans of the President, seemed jeopardized as the air war, for the first time in years, turned into a two-way battle again.

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## APPENDIX I

The Credible Chase Program

One of the main Air Force "answers" on ways to Vietnamize interdiction was its plan to introduce mini-gunships into the South Vietnamese Air Force. These would replace the U.S. AC-119, AC-130, B-57G family of aircraft, used in Commando Hunt operations, with a system more readily maintainable and operable by the South Vietnamese.<sup>1</sup> The plan aimed at alleviating VNAF firepower and airlift shortfalls after U.S. withdrawal by providing light, armed STOL aircraft that could operate from austere forward operating locations. The planes could be used along the contiguous border areas of Laos and in Cambodia in the interdiction or ground support role, and also in an airlift role. By adopting one simple STOL aircraft and by using specially tailored training procedures, the Vietnamese Air Force, it was hoped, could develop an improved capability within the time constraints of the situation.<sup>2</sup>

(S) The concept of a STOL utility aircraft in a light strike/mini-gunship role had already been under consideration for use by the Royal Thai Air Force when the campaign to Vietnamize the interdiction got under way.<sup>3</sup> In February, MACTHAI and CINCPAC had recommended an operational test and evaluation of the Porter Peacemaker aircraft in Thailand, in order to augment and/or substitute for additional helicopter gunships and for T-28s. Such an aircraft could satisfy the requirement for a simple, low-cost counterinsurgency aircraft for our Southeast allies. The President's instructions in late March, emphasizing helicopter gunship capabilities, brought increased interest in the concept.<sup>4</sup>

(S) Secretary Laird, believing a STOL aircraft might meet these various requirements, told Secretary Seamans on 8 April that it would be prudent for the Air Force to carry out tests on at least two such aircraft. He wanted preliminary test results by 30 June 1971. In response to an Air Force bid to aircraft manufacturers, Fairchild Industries submitted the Peacemaker and Helio Corporation the Stallion. The Secretary of the Air Force sent Secretary Laird a preliminary report on 12 July, saying that both demonstrated the required operational capabilities, but certain structural modification and further testing was required.

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(S) On 10 May the mini-gunship concept came fully to life when Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard designated it as one of five major approaches to be investigated in striving for Vietnamization of the interdiction function. He directed the Secretary of the Air Force--in conjunction with others--to:

. . . make detailed investigation of the concept of providing VNAF with a "mini-gunship" fleet . . . The possibility of reducing dependence on Igloo White and of providing a system operable, maintainable, and perhaps even manufacturable by SVN is extremely attractive, if practical. If study indicates feasibility, I believe suitable tests of an available configuration (including some available night vision device) should be conducted expeditiously along with the other tests requested by Secretary of Defense memo of 8 April. "Air-to-Ground CI Aircraft for SEA Allies."5

Secretary Laird backed up investigation of the mini-gunship concept in a 17 May directive to CJCS, urging greater imagination and ingenuity in developing Vietnamese solutions to interdiction. On 10 June Secretary Seamans set a study<sup>6</sup> of the concept to Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard as requested. Prepared by the Office of the Assistant of Vietnamization, headed by Maj Gen Bray, the study gave details on how the mini-gunship concept (designated "Credible Chase") could increase RVNAF self-sufficiency in firepower and mobility through use of large numbers of armed, light STOL aircraft that could operate in an austere environment. Basically, this concept would reorient interdiction efforts from southern Laos to contiguous border areas of South Vietnam and Cambodia, with the STOL aircraft ultimately providing 24-hour coverage of the entire border area from the DMZ to the Laos-Cambodia-Thailand border. A 30 kilometer-wide strip along the entire length of the border could be divided into 22 segments of about 30 x 30 kilometers each which would serve as basic areas of operation. Up to 30 aircraft could be deployed over each sector during daylight hours and the number tripled at night, permitting in-depth coverage. Each aircrew would patrol a selected area and, in conjunction

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with unsophisticated sensors and small, highly mobile ground teams, develop an interdiction capability. Targets developed could be struck immediately or their location forwarded through a Tactical Air Control System for strike as the situation warranted. The aircraft were to be armed with 20 mm side-firing guns or the equivalent. A primary feature of the concept was its low cost as compared to other solutions. Pilots, crews, and maintenance personnel could all be trained in-country, permitting acceleration of the training cycle.\*

(C) Secretary Seamans told Secretary Packard that he would discuss the mini-gunship concept with field commanders during his forthcoming trip to Southeast Asia. Thus he did, asking the latter's views on a combat evaluation of the concept and urging that certain actions, especially funding, be initiated so as to allow a test during the upcoming dry season. Apparently he did not receive a completely favorable response, for according to a message on this from PACAF to General Ryan on 1 July, "in the field there continue to be reservations." 7

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\* Significantly, the study included an "Intelligence" annex which said VNAF prospects were "dim" for unilateral success in conducting a continuing interdiction campaign in southern Laos and along enemy input routes prior to FY 74. By mid-73 North Vietnam would have some 260 MIG-21 Fishbed aircraft, which they would probably employ in the intercept role over Laos. They might--the analysis added prophetically--even increase significantly their deployment of SAMs in the area. These factors, coupled with the existing high AW/AAA threat, would make VNAF gunship, A-1, A-37, and the proposed STOL air interdiction operations prohibitively vulnerable, particularly if NVN should add further sophistication to their AAA/SAM defenses as they did. Unless there was a continued significant U.S. presence beyond 1973, or unless the VNAF was given a substantially greater buildup--with more modern and sophisticated aircraft--than currently projected, the present deterrent to North Vietnamese intervention against air intervention against air interdiction in Laos would no longer be operative. As things stood now, the VNAF would have a limited capability to conduct air interdiction in and around the input gates into RVN and Cambodia and in those areas of southern Laos where supported by ground operations.

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(S) Secretary Laird showed continued support for the mini-gunship concept however, and on 2 July asked the Air Force, with assistance from Army and DSPG, to design a combat test to take place during the next dry season. He added that he was willing to help get Congressional approval for procurement of their preferred STOL aircraft configuration.<sup>8</sup> The Vice Chief of Staff, Gen John C. Meyer, forwarded a management plan for the combat test on 19 July.<sup>9</sup> The Secretary of Defense approved this on 30 July and asked the Air Force to "pursue this effort with the priority and aggressiveness now shown in your successful AC-130 gunship program."<sup>10</sup>

(S) On 6 August, General Meyer, replying to a request from Secretary Seamans, told him that the joint USAF/VNAF Credible Chase combat evaluation target date remained 1 February 1972. Planning for all aspects of it was continuing, pending Congressional approval of funds for the 30 STOL aircraft.<sup>11</sup> On 18 August, a Credible Chase briefing for the Secretary of the Air Force recommended dual source procurement for the STOL aircraft test, so as to help offset any risk that one of the two might run into problems delaying the evaluation.<sup>12</sup> True to his promise, Secretary Laird wrote to Senator Stennis, asking Congressional consideration for the \$14.5 million procurement needed to permit testing of a concept which "would contribute to completing U. S. re-deployment at an early date."<sup>13</sup> Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard and Secretary Seamans also wrote to Senator Stennis on it, Secretary Seamans expressing his "deep personal interest and support for this evaluation."<sup>14</sup>

(S) When the JCS forwarded their Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan to Secretary Laird on 23 August (see p 73), the latter found it still too heavily dependent on U. S. air-power and too inclined to tie up VNAF interdiction capabilities in "lengthy study and test cycles." On 8 October, among many other firm recommendations to remedy this, he proposed a program for incorporating mini-gunships in the FY 72/73 Improvement and Modernization (I&M) program, "either as part of interdiction operations or as a substitute for those air assets diverted to that mission such as fixed wing gunships"--assuming successful test of the Credible Chase

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concept.<sup>15</sup> In a 13 October report to Secretary Laird, Secretary Seamans said that if the planned Credible Chase combat test merited providing a follow-on capability for VNAF in 1973, the Air Force would plan to select a light, armed STOL aircraft in late FY 72 and use it to fulfill any future MAP/FMS requirements for such an aircraft "in the interests of minimizing training, support and logistic requirements." <sup>16</sup>

(S) During this same period, the Deputy Director of Defense Research and Engineering (DDR&E), Mr. Leonard Sullivan, Jr., on a trip to Southeast Asia exploring possible avenues for Vietnamizing the U. S. air interdiction campaign, reported that Credible Chase mini-gunship test preparations were continuing, though "with a certain amount of head shaking." The Chief of Staff of South Vietnam's Joint General Staff (JGS) had approved using 50 percent VNAF pilots (Air America would train them) and 33 percent VNAF maintenance personnel. He had also approved the proposed test's tactical area of responsibility (TAOR), but MACV was encouraging identification of a second, lower threat area, just in case. Sullivan said he explained to the JGS that the United States was quite amenable to other applications for these inexpensive STOL aircraft if substitution would release other VNAF assets for the interdiction role. He also noted that there were some raised eyebrows at the thought that South Vietnam might be able to manufacture this aircraft on its own. <sup>17</sup>

(S) In mid-November, the JCS, replying to Secretary Laird's vigorous 8 October memo, said that the relatively low cost, ease of maintenance, maneuverability and performance of STOL aircraft appeared to warrant consideration of its use for a variety of missions. If additional personnel could be provided to the VNAF, STOL aircraft could be considered as an addition to the currently planned force structure; otherwise, its introduction would have to be at the expense of currently planned squadron unit equipment or by reducing other aircraft such as the O-1. It appeared that one or two STOL squadrons might be operationally ready by late 1972, and an additional four or five as early as the end of FY 73. But whether this should be undertaken and how many aircraft would be required, had to await completion of the Credible Chase evaluation. Further, if the above readiness schedule was to be met, funding and procurement action would have to be initiated immediately. <sup>18</sup>



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(S) On 24 November Secretary Seamans asked Secretary Laird's approval in providing a 5-squadron force of STOL aircraft for the VNAF, with appropriate action to be initiated to obtain the necessary manpower authorization. <sup>19</sup> Secretary Laird gave his concurrence, in a memo to Admiral Moorer, the JCS Chairman, on 29 November:

Review of our manifold efforts to improve RVNAF interdiction capabilities indicates a clear necessity to proceed immediately with procurement action for STOL aircraft if a mini-gunship force is to become available for the 72-73 dry season. Although I agree final assessment of use of Credible Chase aircraft in the interdiction role must await results of the impending field test, I believe enough is known . . . to make certain judgments about their utility. . . . SAF had informed me sufficient numbers of these aircraft could be procured to equip 2 operational squadrons by Nov '72 and 3 additional squadrons by early '73, assuming concurrent funding authorization and timely availability of VNAF trainees. Therefore, I am establishing for planning a goal of 5 operational STOL squadrons (32 UE each--200 total aircraft, including command support and initial attrition) for the FY 73 campaign. The concerted efforts of all concerned will be needed to achieve this goal. I request by 3 December '71 confirmation that a military requirement exists that can be met by the aircraft as proposed in the Credible Chase concept . . . . I further request you undertake steps to coordinate with JGS at the earliest possible date for provision of the manpower to support the STOL aircraft. . . .<sup>20</sup>

(S) The Joint Staff drafted a reply concurring with Secretary Laird's requests, but urging supplemental funding instead of Service budget absorption to take care of the costs as the Secretary had recommended.<sup>21</sup> Meeting on this paper on 1 December, the Air Force, Navy, and Marines were in complete agreement with the Joint Staff position, but the Air Force "looked for the Army to soften the paper's confirmation of a military requirement for STOL aircraft, particularly in the interdiction role." <sup>22</sup> Then on the following

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morning, CINCPAC and COMUSMACV sent messages to JCS stating there was no requirement for the Credible Chase aircraft in South Vietnam. <sup>23</sup>

(S) The Air Force tried hard to support Secretary Laird and to preserve an option for the use of STOL aircraft in South Vietnam during the FY 73 campaign. In a 2 December backup paper for the Chief of Staff, Col Frank G. Lester of the Office of the Assistant for Vietnamization compiled a chronology of memos and responses dating from February 1971, and pointed out how JCS and the field commanders had not been responsive to Secretary Laird's requests regarding Vietnamization of interdiction. Instead, each response from the field had "skirted and avoided the basic issue and assumed explicitly, or implicitly, continued U.S. air power in Southeast Asia." Col Lester recommended sending a message from JCS to CINCPAC, "laying this squarely on the line" in the form of three questions: <sup>24</sup>

1. After U.S. air power is withdrawn from SEA, will continued interdiction be required?
2. If so, are currently programmed VNAF forces adequate?
3. If they are not, what can be done by the fall of 1972?

(S) The proposed message in effect had the JCS confirming a military requirement for the STOL aircraft. But the other services and the Joint Staff would not support the Air Force position. The Chiefs, meeting later in the day on 2 December, decided to delay further consideration of the matter. The next day, Admiral Moorer asked for an extension until 10 December to reply to Secretary Laird's request on confirming a military requirement for the aircraft, so that JCS could get "first hand comments on your proposal" from General Ryan, then on tour in WESTPAC. <sup>25</sup> Secretary Laird acceded to Admiral Moorer's request, acknowledging the difficulties in moving ahead with Credible Chase, including the budgetary issue for DOD. But he stressed that the issues relating to it were "time sensitive and involved matters extending well beyond the STOL squadrons." Regardless of how Credible Chase turned out, South Vietnamese interdiction capabilities had to be maximized as soon as possible. <sup>26</sup>

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(S) The Air Force still sought to counter the objections of MACV and CINCPAC and to preserve the option of five operational STOL squadrons for the FY 73 campaign. Maj Gen Bray the Assistant for Vietnamization, in a 7 December talking paper, reminded the Chief of Staff that ever since Secretary Laird's 19 February directive on Vietnamization of interdiction, the Air Force had "explored in depth every potential alternative we could identify--ranging from the addition of F-4Es and the Igloo White system to STOL aircraft." The latter was the only one that was "potentially feasible, and without major impacts on the VNAF, to alleviate the projected firepower and mobility shortfalls within the time, manpower, training, and lead-time constraints." In the final analysis, Gen Bray said, "we have to address the gut issue: should we, or more important, could we do something, prior to our departure, to improve RVNAF interdiction capabilities? In my judgment, if the answer is 'yes', then the STOL aircraft is the only feasible alternative, considering the constraints." <sup>27</sup> In two subsequent memos the Chief of Staff supported the STOL aircraft as potentially "an appreciable additive capability" for VNAF interdiction operations and urged procurement and manpower authorizations be initiated to protect this option until the requirement for it was confirmed. To be in a position to react to favorable results of the Credible Chase combat test, he said, "we have to act now." <sup>28</sup>

(S) On 10 December, the JCS sent their definitive reply to Secretary Laird. <sup>29</sup> They affirmed that there was a military requirement for the South Vietnamese Air Force to have an interdiction capability, but they could not confirm at this time that the STOL aircraft would meet it. Determination of any military requirements for STOL aircraft as well as the suitability of such aircraft for the interdiction mission would have to await completion of the Credible Chase combat test. They acknowledged the STOL aircraft had demonstrated some capability for armed operations in a low threat environment, and that there were other potential uses for it. But, they noted, it would take some 2,100 additional manpower spaces for a 5-squadron STOL force and would entail difficult and time consuming changes in current VNAF planning for manpower,

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training, and logistics. Requirements for such a force would have to be weighed against those for other RVNAF programs.\* The JCS gave prominence to the views of CINCPAC and MACV, both of whom reiterated that till completion of the Credible Chase test "no military requirement for STOL aircraft can be identified." <sup>30</sup> MACV stressed the massive expansion tasks already facing the VNAF--activating 9 new squadrons by December 1972, not counting the 5 STOL squadrons. Field commanders, had been directed however to commence preliminary manpower planning to support the introduction of STOL aircraft into the force structure as soon as possible in the event a decision was made to equip the VNAF with STOL aircraft following the Credible Chase evaluation.

(~~SECRET~~) The JCS added that they were considering other options for improving RVNAF interdiction capabilities, including accelerated production of F-5E aircraft. This aircraft had a capability for interdiction in a high threat environment and would also provide increased air defense capability in response to increased MIG activity. Finally, they said that in view of the uncertainties regarding the interdiction capabilities of STOL aircraft and the impact of their as yet undetermined costs, service cost sharing (as Secretary Laird had proposed) should not be considered. They strongly urged that supplemental funding be sought.

(~~SECRET~~) In early 1972, the JCS proposed--and was later seconded therein by the Secretary of the Air Force--that the combat evaluation test of Credible Chase in South Vietnam be cancelled and the

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\* In a later memo to CJCS (17 Jan 1972), the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., complained that it was "increasingly evident accelerated RVNAF interdiction programs are taxing RVN resources. . any early dedication of RVNAF resources to Credible Chase (before final evaluation) would represent another serious potential dilution of VNAF capability to undertake responsibility for support of the South Vietnamese Navy's coastal surveillance, interdiction and riverine operations." In other words, neither the Navy nor the Army (see pp 123-4) looked with favor on the program.

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and the test conducted instead at Eglin AFB "due to the accelerated U. S. redeployment schedule, mission priorities, ceiling constraints, and other considerations." 31

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## APPENDIX II

The "Menu" Bombing Report

(~~TOP SECRET~~) This report, requested by Senator Stuart Symington of Missouri, revealed that B-52 bombers had attacked enemy targets in Cambodia for the first time on 19 March 1969. The Joint Chiefs of Staff on several occasions, i. e., in September and December 1968 and again in January 1969\* -- had recommended that the B-52s be employed to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia along the border of South Vietnam.

(~~TOP SECRET~~) Classified background information used in preparing the Symington report (undated paper, "B-52 Bombing in Cambodia, 18 March 1969-26 May 1970," 15 pages, in Secretary of the Air Force file 1381.73) indicates that the specific impetus for the secret bombing--code-named Menu--stemmed from a 9 February 1969 message to General Wheeler from General Abrams. The message outlined recent intelligence information on Viet Cong central headquarters (COSVN) in Cambodia and gave evidence of enemy preparations for a large-scale offensive. Three days later, on 12 February a proposal for a concentrated B-52 attack in the Fish Hook area of Cambodia was presented to the "highest authority," which wanted the matter held as closely as possible. On 23 February, JCS forwarded concepts and criteria for such attacks to MACV, and the next day in another cable (JCS msg 2262 23/2348Z Feb 69) (JCS msg 02274 24/1430 Feb 69) authorized the latter to use them to plan the attacks with Strategic Air Command (SAC) representatives. MACV complied the following day (COMUSMACV msg 2463 25/1153Z to CINCSAC Feb 69). The SAC Advanced Echelon (SACADVON)

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\* See JCS 2472/399-3, 10 Jan-1 Apr 72 (TS; E. Hartsook, The Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1969: The Administration Emphasizes Air Power (TS), Ofc of AF History, 1971, p 6.

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--a liaison unit for CINCSAC located at MACV Headquarters to assist with the B-52 effort--was to act as the principal coordinator and technical planner for the operations. In subsequent testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in July and August 1973, General Abrams said he had requested authority to bomb the Cambodian sanctuaries. General Wheeler said it was President Nixon who decided to keep the bombing operations secret. General George Brown, then being nominated for Chief of Staff, USAF, testified that the purpose of the bombing was "to chase COSVN headquarters . . . which functioned from just across the border in Cambodia."

~~(TOP SECRET)~~ In simplified form, the Menu concept of operations consisted of requesting a B-52 strike on a target in South Vietnam through normal channels, while simultaneously requesting, through special communications channels, a strike on the Cambodian target nearest the one in South Vietnam. The Menu targets were six enemy base sanctuary areas along the South Vietnam/Cambodian border. For each mission, a SACADVON representative would pick up the selected Menu targets from MACV and hand carry them to the MSQ site where the radar personnel used them to prepare new computations for the upcoming sorties. Meanwhile, Menu crews were briefed routinely on the South Vietnamese targets, but with instructions to slightly extend the bomb release point or make a minor correction as directed by the MSQ site. On its final run, the aircraft would pass over or near the target in South Vietnam but release its bombs on the Menu target. The MSQ paperwork on the Menu targets was destroyed and the only report issued by the radar site was "mission complete" relayed to SACADVON by telephone. The routine Form 15 report showing the South Vietnamese target and post-release data went to Saigon as in regular B-52 missions. Data peculiar to the Menu strikes were not introduced into any automated data base, but they were maintained manually in MACV, SAC, and in the Office of the JCS and available to those with a need-to-know. With the incursion into Cambodia in early May and June 1970, the requirement for special security procedures on bombing operations ended and the

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last Menu strike took place on 26 May 1970. Between 18 March 1969 and 26 May 1970, Menu operations flew 3,875 sorties, expending 108,823 tons of munitions.

(S) The Symington report established that civilian authority had given approval for all of the secret Menu bombings. Dr. Henry Kissinger testified during hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on his nomination for Secretary of State, that the policy of no formal public acknowledgment of the bombing in Laos and Cambodia had been instituted for positive diplomatic reasons. The National Security Council had approved use of a "cover story" on the bombing and had provided press guidance on the initial attack, including directions to MACV for responding to possible inquiries about it. The injunction to secrecy remained an urgent consideration throughout the operation. A special "back channel" communications system was employed for messages and knowledge of the operations was limited to a small group responsible for execution. Within Hq SAC, for example, the need-to-know list was limited in the beginning to the CINC and one Operations planner. Certain members of Congress were advised of the strikes by Executive Branch personnel. Even so, these raids were in fact reported less than two months after they began, in the New York Times of 8 May 1969 in a story by William Beecher from Washington. Their disclosure allegedly led to the institution of several wire taps by the administration in an effort to discover the source of the information leak.



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## APPENDIX III

Earlier B-52 Bombing of Laos

(TS) B-52 operations also took place over the Plain of Jars (PDJ) area of Laos in early 1970, although this was not generally known until revealed by the Defense Department report prepared for Senator Symington in mid-1973. The Administration had acknowledged and explained the very first B-52 strike in this area on 17 February 1970\*, but information on subsequent missions there--a total of 147 in 1970 and 270 in 1971--was not available through normal channels. As in the case of the secret Menu bombings in Cambodia, all message traffic on these B-52 strikes (code-named Good Look) was processed through special security channels. For each B-52 PDJ area target request submitted through the special channels, a corresponding routine request went forward through regular channels for a mission in southern Laos, South Vietnam, or Cambodia. The American Ambassador to Laos established these restrictions on disclosure in response to the concern of the Royal Laotian Government. He was also responsible for transmitting the strike requests (after validation by COMUSMACV and CINCPAC) to the JCS who obtained implementation authority from appropriate civilian officials. Beginning in 1972, MACV was empowered to approve the B-52 missions in the PDJ area, subject to cancellation by the Secretary of Defense. The Good Look missions continued to use the special target reporting system through 26 April 1972, making use in all of 896 cover targets in Southern Laos, 166 in South Vietnam and 14 in Cambodia. Sorties after this date continued on a regular basis. Between 1 January 1972 and 17 April 1973, the B-52s flew 2,101 sorties in the PDJ area, expending 47,644 tons of munitions.

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\* See The Air Force in Southeast Asia, 1970, TS, by E. Hartsook /Off/AF Hist 1972/, pp 4-5.

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## GLOSSARY

AA	Antiaircraft
AAA	Antiaircraft artillery
AFAG	Air Force Advisory Group
AFLC	Air Force Logistics Command
Arc Light	B-52 operations in Southeast Asia
ARDF	airborne radio direction finding
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASSS	Air Staff Summary Sheet
AW	Automatic Weapons
Barrell Roll	Strike area for sorties flown in northern Laos
BDA	Bomb damage assessment
CAS	close air support
CBU	cluster bomb unit
CHECO	Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations (Hq PACAF)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CICC	Combined Interdiction Coordination Committee
CICP	Combined Interdiction Campaign Plan
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific Command
CINCPACAF	Commander in Chief, Pacific Air Forces
CINCSAC	Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command
CJCS	Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
CNO	Chief, Naval Operations
College Eye Task Force	EC-121D Airborne warning & control aircraft
COMUSMACV	U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
CONUS	Continental United States
Credible Chase	code name for mini-gunship concept

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CRIMP	Consolidated Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces I&M Program
CSAFM	Chief of Staff Air Force Memorandum
CVA	attack aircraft carrier
DART	Deployable Automatic Relay Terminal
DASC	Direct Air Support Center
DDR&E	Director of Defense Research and Engineering (Department of Defense)
DIA	Defense Intelligence Agency (Department of Defense)
DJSM	Director Joint Staff Memo
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DOD	Department of Defense
DSPG	Defense Special Projects Group
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FAE	Fuel Air Explosive
FANK	Khmer Armed Forces
FSB	Fire Support Base
GCI	ground-controlled intercept
GPO	Government Printing Office
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
IFR	Instrument Flight Rules
I&M	Improvement and Modernization
Igloo White	Surveillance system consisting of air-delivered sensors, relay aircraft, and an infiltration surveillance center
ISA	International Security Affairs (Department of Defense)
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JCSM	Joint Chiefs of Staff Memorandum
JGS	Joint General Staff (SVN)



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Lam Son 719	Cross-border operation into Laos, Feb 71
LGB	laser-guided bombs
LOC	Lines of communications
LORAN	long-range navigation
MACTHAI	Military Assistance Command, Thailand
MACV	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam
MAP/FMS	Military Assistance Program/ Foreign Military Sales
MASF	Military Assistance Service Funded
MIG	Russian Fighter Aircraft
NSDM	National Security Defense Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
NVN	North Vietnam
Pave Sword	laser-seeking pod for the F-4
Paveway	F-4 aircraft using either laser, electro- optical or infrared devices for guidance
POL	Petroleum, Oil & Lubricants
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RDT&E	Research, Development, Test & Evaluation
Rolling Thunder	air strikes against selected targets and LOCs in NVN (Mar 1965-Oct 1968)
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
SA	Systems Analysis
SAC	Strategic Air Command
SAFOS	Office of the Secretary of the Air Force
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SEADAB	SEA Data Base
SRG	Senior Review Group
Steel Tiger	7AF operating area in Southern Laos
STOL	Short take-off and landing
SVN	South Vietnam

~~SECRET~~

TACAIR	Tactical Air
TACC	Tactical Air Control Center
TACAN	Tactical Air Navigation
TOAN THANG	RVN cross-border operations into Cambodia
USARV	U.S. Army in Vietnam
USIB	U.S. Intelligence Board
USN	U.S. Navy
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force
WESTPAC	Western Pacific
Yankee Station	Carrier Force area off coast of NVN

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## ABSTRACT

This study deals with Administration plans and policies pursued and implemented in Southeast Asia during 1971. Those policies were a continuation of President Nixon's earlier decisions to withdraw U.S. combat troops and turn the war over to the South Vietnamese. While U.S. ground forces were withdrawing in large numbers and while South Vietnam was not yet strong enough to defend itself, the President sought during the year to gain time and to stave off enemy initiatives by attacking and destroying the latter's huge stockpiles and troop buildups outside South Vietnam. Aided by massive U.S. air support, indigenous troops undertook major campaigns (Toan Thang in Cambodia, Lam Son 719 in Laos) to destroy the enemy in his sanctuaries in those countries. In both cases, but particularly in Lam Son 719, U.S. air strikes against enemy troops and equipment proved crucial, preventing catastrophe. Despite this near-failure, or perhaps because of it, the United States intensified its Vietnamization efforts, striving particularly to provide South Vietnam with its own capability to interdict enemy infiltration. Finally, the study recounts the ominous buildup in enemy air defense activity in the latter part of 1971, heralding the Easter offensive of 1972.

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